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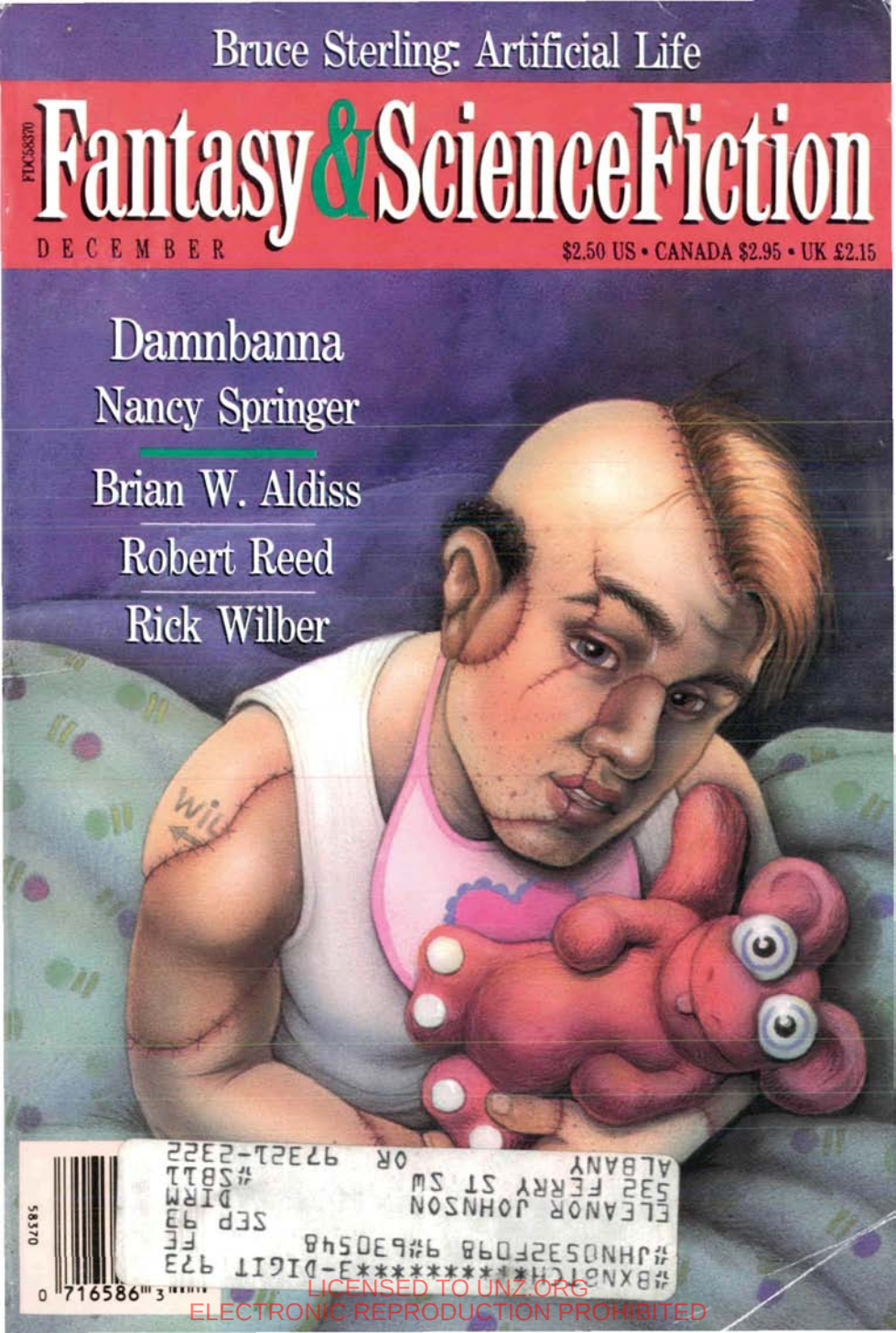

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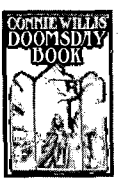

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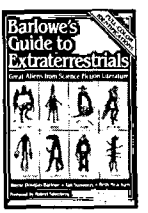

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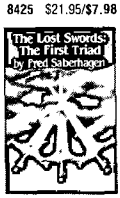

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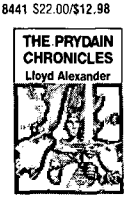

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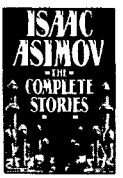

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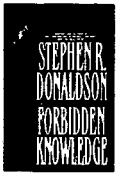

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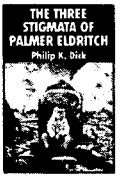

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THE MAGAZINE OF
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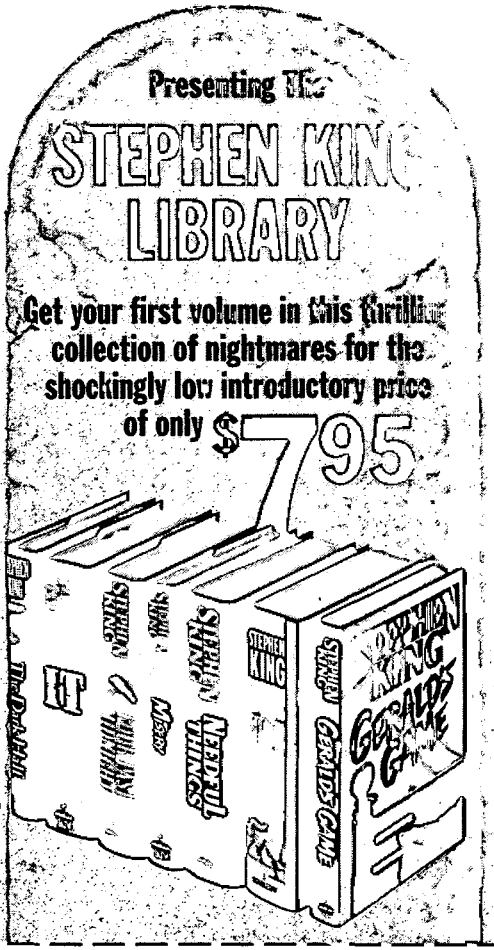

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Editorial

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

IN THE summer of 1992, I traveled all over the country. Everywhere I went, from Juneau, Alaska, to Dallas, Texas, people wanted to know what the latest trends were in science fiction and fantasy.

Trends. As if a genre were as predictable as fall fashions.

There are trends to be sure: things as minor as paisley being the pattern of choice for people in the know. The stream of alternate history stories has become a trickle. Science fiction has moved closer to home — a writer is more likely to write about the effects of bio-engineering on a child than space travel on a culture. But even these trends reflect a desperate editor's attempt to answer an impossible question. For as I make my declarations, I buy another excellent alternate history tale or read a wonderful novel about life in outer space.

But the questioners don't really care about the minor issues. They want global predictions. Will women continue to wear pants or must they revert to corset and bustles? Is science fiction a dead genre? Has fantasy tapped out the mother lode? Will horror ever go beyond ghosts and body parts?

Trends. Cycles. Booms and busts. How is fiction changing? Where is the literature taking us?

Ah, now that's the real question. Not trends. Trends refer to marketing. Horror, fantasy and science fiction are sales tools that help consumers find the products they're looking for. If all books were marked "fiction," think how much time a consumer would spend in a store, reading cover blurbs and trying to decide which book to buy.

To consider the question of literature, we must look beyond the science fiction and fantasy field because it is only a part of fiction published in the United States. We must consider everything that hits the shelves — good and bad, acceptable genre or no. Then and only then will we be able to guess where literature is taking us.

But most of us lack the time to read that much. As a teenager, I

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read one to four books a day. Now, with the reading I do for the magazine, my own writing, and a few squeezed minutes of leisure time, I still manage to read about two novels a week, from all different genres, and most published within the calendar year. Combine that with the book reviews I read, the audio books I listen to, and the conversations I have with savvy friends, and I probably have a working knowledge of 200 books published in a year which produces thousands.

Still, I find patterns that intrigue me. Mainstream literature has embraced "magic realism" (which, on this side of the border, I call fantasy since few North Americans manage to get that mystical acceptance so common to Latin American magic realism). Romance fiction has returned to its gothic roots with ghosts and vampires, and has added time travel as a viable subgenre. Even mystery fiction explores the paranormal: psychics abound, and odd, unexplainable events appear in the most rational novel. And science fiction, fantasy and horror are becoming more realistic, with settings closer to home.

Does that mean that marketing labels are disappearing? That slipstream stories — stories that defy easy classification — are becoming the norm? No. Time-travel romances still focus on the boy-meets-girl story. Psychic detectives still want to know whodunnit.

Does it mean that America is becoming more accepting of the fantastic? No. Our literature has always contained fantastic themes: from the mythic journey of "Young Goodman Brown" to the cloven hooved messiah in *Rosemary's Baby*.

The pattern I see merely reflects my reading tastes — and proves on a small human scale where literature is leading us.

Literature is leading us where it always does: back to ourselves.

The fashion analogy I made earlier is not so far off. For even if paisley is in, those of us who prefer solid colors will continue to buy fabric without patterns. If the current trend in fiction is stories with heavy Dickensian prose, people who prefer leaner styles will still find writers whose styles have the clarity of Hemingway.

Trends in fiction? They aren't important. For no matter where we live, no matter what we believe, we must continue to read. As long as fiction expands our world while providing an escape, as long as it makes us think while feeding our dreams, then it will bring us all a little closer and make us a little more human.

And that, my friends, is more important than any trend could ever be.

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Rick Wilber returns to these pages with this chilly and chilling tale of crime in the frozen northland. His previous story, "Calculating Love," appeared in our March issue. In addition to F&SF, Rick's short fiction has appeared in Analog, Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, Pulphouse, *and* Aboriginal SF *as well as in many anthologies and literary journals. He is the co-editor of SUB-TROPICAL SPECULATIONS, an anthology of Florida-themed science fiction, and he edits* Fiction Quarterly, *the short story supplement of the Tampa Tribune.*

ICE COVERS THE HOLE

By Rick Wilber

I

IT IS SATURDAY THE seventh of January near Mankato, Minnesota. The temperature is forty-seven degrees below zero as Melissa O'Malley tries to finish her homework.

The farmhouse where she lives is a once-proud, old two-story frame with white siding and faded brown trim. It was, for decades, a handsome home, but time and weather have worn it down.

A frozen deer carcass hangs from an upstairs window. Melissa's father, Melchior, hung it there four days before. Mel killed it out of season, but the farm is isolated, the window faces north, looking away from the unpaved road, and so he isn't worried about the kill being discovered.

The O'Malleys, just the father and daughter for some years now, have a freezer to hold the meat, but Mel has hung the deer outside until he can

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find the time to dress it. The cold will preserve anything when Minnesota is in the depths of another interminable winter.

The carcass hangs from a rope that is tied to Melissa's mother's bed. Melissa was five when Mother Mary walked off into another frozen January night. She headed south toward Lake Minnetoksak, and Melissa never saw her again.

Melchior keeps Mary's room ready for her, as if she might return home at any time. The general consensus, though, is that she found a hole in the lake's thick cover of ice and climbed in. They dragged the lake's deep glacial bottom, but found nothing. She hadn't been happy.

The rope snakes out through a window and is then wrapped tightly around the front legs of the deer. The back legs, seven feet farther down, tap against Melissa's window when the winter wind sends the carcass swaying. The quick scrape against the window reminds her of something, something hidden deep that disturbs her, and it has nearly driven her crazy.

Two days before, to solve the problem without offending her father, Melissa opened her window and wrapped the hooves in an extra pair of mittens, thinking to muffle the metallic crack. On this night, Melissa's radio muffles the noise, but she can almost feel the rasp of the mittened hooves against the glass, the sound now more of a strange muffled tap and scrape then the earlier sharp snap. She looks up from her algebra and stares into the bright, moonlight-on-snow evening that darkens as the huge shadow sways by.

It is all too much. Melissa stabs off the radio, rises from her desk. She loves her father dearly; he's been everything to her, especially since Mother Mary left. But this is just too much.

She walks over to the window, tugs down on the old wooden frame until it gives, then reaches out into the bitter cold to grab the legs as they go by. All she wants to do is stop them, keep them still and silent.

And as she makes that hard grab, the bitter wind blowing past her, the northern lights edging up from the horizon in broken, shattered waves of vermilion and gold, Melissa feels an electric shock, a hard, erotic pulse in her stomach that travels down into her hips in a muscle-tightening spasm. She gasps in pleasure and pain, and thinks, for a moment, that she is falling, but is, instead, pawing away at the hardened snow to reach the grass beneath, when she smells the Man and looks up to see him there.

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She knows what that stick is that he holds. She tries to bolt, to dodge the death, but not in time. There is a bright bark of thunder and flame, and her legs don't work for some reason when she tries to spring into the underbrush and away, but can't. She stumbles and falls and breathes a shallow, quick breath that seems almost nothing at all, and then there is puzzlement, and then there is one final dull ache of pain, and then there is darkness and nothing at all.

II

FOUR YEARS later, to the day. Melissa is a beautiful, sacred eighteen, long black hair soft against her sweatered sholders as she cries softly and wonders how this could be, how Danny could possibly be dead. Her Danny, her touchdown quarterback, her handsome, kind Danny Finnegan, home now from the Sands in a body bag, home a medaled hero of the low, simmering struggle that steadily claims lives from the trenches and the heat of a desert a million miles away from the hard, clean, understandable winter of southern Minnesota.

She stands in the front pew of the funeral home's small chapel. She thinks of how it was when she and Danny had kissed, fumbling for passion in the front seat of his Toyota pickup and on the rough fabric of the couch in his family's living room.

They had never made love. Melissa at eighteen has never done that; sex is not at the top of her list of favorite things. All her friends have done it, and she does wonder sometimes if she's frigid. Now, with Danny gone, a part of her wishes she'd allowed him, at least once.

Poor Danny. Melissa rises, walks over to her hero, and reaches down to touch the waxy face that looks so wrong, so falsely serious. She reaches down to touch him one last, final time. He is cold, she thinks as she strokes her hero's cheek, thinking about what was and might have been.

Then, in a wave of emotion, comes again that convulsive electric shock — that hard, erotic throb that washes through her as she is suddenly terrified: the sheets are coming over their trenches just a few hundred meters away, while the gas is rolling ahead of them right toward him. It's been ninety-seven days of terror and boredom and hell and fear in this sweat and stink. He looks between the slits of the sandbags, reaches down to grab his mask again, and discovers it isn't there.

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It isn't there! He scrambles around for it and can't find it. He's seen the mucous pink death that wretches up from the lungs of too many friends, and he can't find the mask, the damn mask! He stands, turns once to fire a witless burst toward the roiling smoke, and then vaults back out of the trench to run from the sheets, to run from the smoke, the fear and the coughing death, the blistered skin that falls away to the bone. He hears distantly, an order to halt, but can't; he can't stop at all. He feels a slap in his back, a punch, and then warmth, a pleasant glow. His legs give way, and he falls onto the sand that is oddly cool and comforting. He tries to look up. He is quite calm. He wonders why he ran as it gets perversely dark around him, and then, slow fade, there is nothing.

Detective Robert Finnegan is standing at the left of the casket as Melissa touches his dead son's cheek. He sees her freeze, watches her eyes go glassy. She seems ready to faint. He takes three steps around the edge of the casket and reaches toward her elbow to give her support. Poor kid: Danny's girl and now this. Damn.

Finnegan grasps her elbow, and there is a quick flash of something, an image: of blazing sun overwhelming him, and then of sand, heat, and fear. He suddenly knows his hero son died a coward, was shot in the back. The image, in an instant, tells him that, and then it is gone, nothing, as if never there.

He shakes his head slightly, clears the cobwebs. Danny ran? His Danny? Christ, the kid never ran from a fight in his life. What was that? What just happened?

He looks at pretty Melissa, Danny's girl.

She looks at him, speaks softly: "You saw it, too. At least part of it. You know."

He can only nod.

Later, in his office downtown, they talk. The detective has his son's death spread out in front of him on the desk: the letter from the company commander, the official word from the Army, the pieces of paper, pieces of metal, pieces of cloth that say his son died a hero's death, defending democracy somehow.

"But it isn't true; at least, I don't think it is," says Melissa. "You saw it, too. He ran. Danny ran."

And Detective Finnegan — Jesus, Mary, and Joseph — knows it's true.

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III

IT IS the fifth of January, and very warm in Georgetown. Melissa at twenty-five is beautiful, smart, and determined to never be cold again. She has been on this tiny island for three years and hasn't tired of it a bit, has no intention of ever leaving. She works for a charter company that's run by her boyfriend's father. She had met the boy in college, at the University of Florida, and when they graduated, she fled with him even farther south, away from Minnesota and down to these islands. He wants to marry her, but she won't. She's not sure why. He's handsome, bright, and kind, and the charter company is hugely successful. But Melissa dodges those final commitments. They've never made love.

She handles the phones for the company, keeps Ziggy Marley's tapes on the cassette player, writes press releases and brochures and, in her spare time, poetry. She has long black hair, her mother's Celtic blue eyes, and an athletic body from running on the beach.

The phone rings, and it is Robert Finnegan. She hasn't seen him since a few days after the funeral, when they talked about what had happened.

Finnegan hasn't called to chat. There's been a murder in Mankato, a nasty one. A mother and her young daughter were raped and then knifed repeatedly and then left out in the subzero night for their blood to freeze as it oozed from their wounds.

Finnegan wants to know if Melissa will come up and try to help. The department — hell, everyone, including the FBI — is lost on this one. The guy is good, very good, about cleaning up his act; he's even used bleach at the scene to obliterate evidence. Finnegan will try anything, even a vision from a touch on the dead. Melissa can fly in, visit with her father, spend a day or two in town seeing old friends, and then head back to the sun —Finnegan will pick up the tab, just on the odd chance that it might help.

See her father? She'd like that, she has to admit. Saying good-bye to Melchior was the only hard part about leaving old, frozen Mankato. He's a good, strong, no-nonsense man — hardworking, simple, straightforward. Those big, rough hands of his have helped lead her toward adulthood. Melissa has always loved her daddy, being grateful for his guidance. It was just the two of them for all those years.

Finnegan goes on, talking about the murders, about how horrible this

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all is, but Melissa doesn't need any more cajoling. She hates the cold with a passion, and fears what the touch might bring, but she agrees. She'll stay only one night, though, she tells him. In, try for the touch, see her father, and back out — that's it. He agrees.

A bit later she calls her father, tells him she'll be home for a day or two, makes plans to see him. The next day, there are kisses in the morning from the boyfriend, the little prop plane over to Antigua, the jumbo from there to the Twin Cities nonstop. Weird, from eighty above to forty below in about five hours. Tough to take, but here she is, Mankato again: frozen town with hard, dirty ice in the streets, and a thin sun in that pale blue sky, and steam rising from everywhere, from car exhausts to homes to faces — vapor everywhere in the cold.

Finnegan has aged some, Melissa thinks. There's more gray hair and a thicker paunch. He met her in Minneapolis, drove her the eighty miles down to Mankato, got her checked in at the hotel, and then took her, no use waiting, over to the morgue for the big touch, a glimpse maybe, of the murderer.

She almost vomits as the big drawer is pulled back and Finnegan zips back the thick plastic. The poor woman's gray skin has one slash on the right arm, and then six orderly, precise puncture wounds that start near the navel and end at the neck. It's horrible, unbearable, nothing prettied up like at the funeral home. Gray lips. Gray face.

Melissa takes a deep breath, the smell of formaldehyde everywhere, and reaches down to the skin. Touches it, expecting that jolt again after all these years, expecting that pulse and electric shock.

But gets nothing. A soft give, that's all. Nothing, No vision, no hard pulse, nothing.

She tries the body in the next drawer, the poor little girl. The corpse is perfect; the only mars are dark bruises around the throat. But the body seems deflated, pathetic. Melissa touches the cheek, the shoulder. Nothing.

"It was worth the try," Finnegan says a few minutes later as he walks her back to the car in the dying afternoon sunlight. "Maybe it was something you've grown out of, or something that would happen only once or twice in a lifetime. Something like that. It was worth a shot. I'm glad we tried."

"Sure," she says, but knows better. He's disappointed in her; he's put his own career on the line just getting her here. She wishes she could do something for him, but it just wasn't there.

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He drops her off at her hotel, a new, plastic Holiday Inn just across from the mall at the south edge of town.

"Pick you up about ten tomorrow," he says as they pull up to the main entrance. "That'll get you to the airport by noon. By this time tomorrow, you'll be back in the sunshine, and you can forget about all this."

He wipes his brow. He's sweating despite the cold; the car's heater and his own nervous energy or something are overheating him. God, he'd hoped that this might help. They've got to figure out a way to stop this guy before he does it again.

He looks at pretty Melissa, thinks of his son again by looking at her. This girl might have been his daughter-in-law. He would have liked that: she's a good one, came a long way for this, put up with a lot in her life, her mother's disappearance and all. "Look," he says again, "we tried, O.K.? It was worth it. Have a good time with your dad tonight; tell him hi for me. I'll see you in the morning."

"Sure," she says, opening the door, feeling the heat ooze out from the car as she swings her legs over, steps out. She feels badly about this. She leans in, shakes his hand, then waves as he drives off.

Damn, it's cold. She wraps her coat tigher, the old down jacket a holdover from her high school days, the only thing she could find in her closet in Georgetown that might measure up to this weather. It's a quarter to five in the afternoon, and pitch-black out already. God, she hates this bitter wind. She has two hours before Melchior will come to meet her for dinner. She goes to her room and showers, the water as hot as she can stand it.

At seven on the dot, Melchior is there, wheeling the same old Ford truck into the parking lot, climbing out stiffly on that bad left leg, walking in the main entrance and then through the swinging doors into the restaurant. Melissa watches all this out the window from her little table with the silly red glass candle and the silly checkerboard tablecloth and the corny farm implements hanging on the wall.

She waves at him. He smiles, strides over to her with that slight hop the bad leg gives him.

"Mellie, Mellie. Good to see you, sweetie. I'm so glad you're here." He hugs her, almost picks her up from her chair to do it, crushing her in those strong, wiry arms.

"Hi, Dad." It's all she can manage. He looks happy, happier than she's

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seen him since as far back as she can remember.

They order some coffee, go through some perfunctory apologies. She's sorry she hasn't called more, but the island phones aren't that good. He's sorry he hasn't written more often, but he didn't know what to say, how to talk about how much he's missed having her around. He's not good at putting stuff like that down on paper.

He hits her with questions: How is it down there? Island fever yet? Ready to come home?

"Dad, I'm happy there," she says. "Billy and I get along fine, and the island is just heaven. You'll have to come and visit. There's a live volcano you can walk down into, and a waterfall that you can stand under, and the sailing is. . . ."

He shakes his head. "I couldn't stand that heat. I need the cold, Mellie; I need winter. It's honest, clean. The best time of year. Besides," he adds as an afterthought, "someone's got to look after the farm."

"In the dead of winter, Dad? There's nothing for you to do. Get Old Man Svenson to look in on the place every now and then. Unless you've gone and got some more cows or something, that's all it would take."

"No, you know I gave up on that. Gave up on most of it, really. Just plant some corn down by the stream, and soybeans up in the top twenty. Spend most of my time hunting and ice fishing. I've still got that little shack down on Minnetoksak where I drop a line, and that's about it."

He smiles at the thought of leaving all that behind, even for a few days. "No," he says, shaking his head. "No, it's just that I can't leave it; that's all."

He hasn't left the farm for more than a few hours since Mary left. He gets up early, gets a few chores done, drives into town for a breakfast of scrambled eggs and hash browns and bacon at the Little House diner, buys a few supplies, and comes back to the farm. It's a well-ordered life.

Melissa looks at him, his clean, plaid work shirt buttoned to the top, his cap covering that every-week haircut right to the trim line, his nails cut and cleaned despite all the dirt they go through every day. He's always been tidy.

Melissa wonders if he still keeps Mary's room ready for her return, the lace dusted on the top of the old chest of drawers, the bed made with the sheets and comforter cleaned every week, the windows cleaned every Saturday — all of it for poor missing Mary.

But Melissa doesn't ask him anything like that. She just smiles, agrees

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with him, keeps the peace. "I'm glad you could come tonight, Dad. It's good to see you."

He pauses, gets very serious. "I'm glad you asked me, Mellie. Gives me the chance to say something."

He puts his hands on the table, folds them together, looks at his daughter. "Things are better now, Mellie. I don't drink much anymore, and I try not to get so mad about things."

He's struggling with this, working hard to admit this weakness. Melissa hurts for him. He's always been so strong, so dependable. Hard, cold land. Hard drink. Some anger. She has always just accepted it, embraced it really as a part of him, a strong, important part.

"Hell, I know how bad I was, honey. It was awful for you. I'm not surprised you left. I understand all that. Took me a long time, that's all —a long time."

"Dad. Daddy. That's not why I left. It was the cold, and this town. . . ."

He brushes her thoughts aside; he has a lot to say here, and means to get it out in the open.

He sips his coffee, collects these hard thoughts. "I know you're not ready for this yet, Mellie. I know you think I'll just go on forever. But the farm is out of debt, and when I'm gone, it's yours. I'd like you to settle on it, find some guy worth spending time with, and make the place really yours."

She starts to speak again, to slow him down. She doesn't want to hear this. But he raises his hand to shush her.

"I know I did a lot of bad things, Mellie. Awful things. Your poor mother. Hell, it was my drinking that drove her off; I'm sure of that now."

He stares right at his daughter, and she can only look back, wondering why he's doing this.

"I just want to say I'm sorry for all that. It's different now. I know you don't want to come back yet, but when you do, well, things are different. I'm a better man."

He sits back, smiles again. "There, I've said it, O.K.?"

"O.K., Dad. You've said it." And she smiles back at him, reaches across the table to take those huge, rough, gnarled hands into hers. So strong. Kept that farm going all these years.

She looks outside for a moment. A gust of wind steals a thin haze of snow from the frozen drifts the plows have edged around the parking lot. It's a long way from Georgetown.

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Dinner is hamburgers done up fancy, and then there's more coffee and more talk. Mel talks about the farm, about ice fishing in Minnetoksak, about hunting, about the weather and the drought and the soybeans and the prices, and the evening flows along nicely.

Eventually it's all pretty much been said. It's sneaking up on midnight, and Mel's an early riser, gets up around five, so he's going to head home.

Melissa walks him to the truck.

The aurora dances across the northern horizon, and they stop to watch for a minute in the parking lot.

"None of that down on that island," Melchior says.

"You're right, Dad," Melissa agrees, and then pulls the collar of her coat up tight against the cold.

They reach the truck, and damned if there isn't a deer carcass in the back bed of the pickup.

"Dad?"

"Found it on the highway on the way here. Broken neck, I think. Still warm when I stopped. Just put it here to get it off the road, but now I'm thinking I might as well take it on home and dress it. No sense in letting good meat go to waste."

Melissa just shakes her head, smiles at her father. Some things don't change, of course. Still neat and tidy — everything in its place; nothing goes to waste.

She looks at the deer, dark eyes filmed over in the harsh light from the parking lot. Poor thing. She reaches down to give it a pat, express a little sympathy.

She flashes; that pulse grabs her. There is frozen ground beneath her in the moonless dark, then gravel, a smooth, hard surface, sudden lights, horns, screeching noises, a huge Man thing bearing down, turning its side to her, slamming into her, and she is tossed across the smooth, hard surface to its far side, where she lies for a moment, struggles to rise but cannot, tries to move her head but cannot, tries to see but cannot, as the darkness grows and overwhelms her until there is nothing.

Melissa jerks her hand back. She saw it, saw the end.

Melchior is talking: "It's been great, Mellie. Thanks, honey, for giving me this chance to say some things I needed to say."

He hugs her hard, and then, not looking back, climbs into the Ford, slams the door shut, jams it into reverse, pulls back, and then drives off.

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He hadn't noticed her shock at the touch of the deer, was too occupied with his own changes, his efforts to put a couple of lives back together.

Melissa watches him drive off, the red taillights shrinking into the cold and then gone. Overhead, the aurora grows brighter, half the sky now in muted reds and yellows, shattered waves of it moving across the dark dome over Melissa's head.

She goes inside. She calls Finnegan, wakes him up at home with the number he left her, tells him what happened, waits for him to arrive.

IV

FINNEGAN DOESN'T question the 12:30 A.M. call. He just gets up, whispers to his wife where he's headed, and goes. She's used to it, he knows with a certain regret. Comes with the territory. It's left her lonely, though, and that's too bad. Another child might have helped.

It's only ten minutes to the Holiday Inn. Fifteen more to the morgue. They don't say much as they drive over the flat once-prairie, now housing tracts and strip malls.

They pull up to the morgue, neither having said much. Melissa just wants this to be over with. Finnegan wants to stop this damn butcher before it happens again.

A locked door, a buzzer, a guard, a long walk into the cold room redolent of formaldehyde. The drawer needs to be oiled, squeaks as it opens. It is the mother, gray.

Melissa touches her; Finnegan puts his hand on Melissa's shoulder. Together they are jolted, a spasm in the loins, a surge:

There is a blade, rising, dropping, held by gnarled hands. A red baseball cap with a large bill covers the top half of a face that flashes by. Splattered blood, droplets of it in the air; she knows it is her own.

Cary, her sweet little girl, is in the other room crying. Cary wants her mommy, but Mommy's busy right now — raising her right hand to ward off that blade, and seeing the slash open from the palm down past the wrist so more spurts out. There is a certain curious pressure on her chest. She looks, and sees the blade, in a horrid kind of forever slow penetration, punch its way through her, then rise for more. There is no pain. There is no feeling. There is the distant cry of Cary as the scene fades, darkens, is

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black, and then is nothing.

"My God," says Finnegan, taking his hand off Melissa's shoulder. He turns away, walks away from the smell, the touch, the awful reality.

"I couldn't see a face. Just a mouth, and that cap. And I'm sure it was a man," Melissa says, quite calm now as she stands her ground. This has to be done.

Finnegan walks back, pale, and helps the guard pull out the next drawer. This one runs smoother, no squeals from it as it opens. It is the daughter, Cary.

Finnegan puts his hand on Melissa's shoulder as she reaches down to touch the girl's cheek.

It is even worse, though far less violent. Cary doesn't understand the man with the red cap, what he's doing to her, and why those rough hands are holding her there on the neck, and why Mommy won't help stop it, and why is this happening, where is Mommy, when will this stop?

It does stop, mercifully, and Melissa pulls back. Finnegan keeps his hand on her shoulder, for support now. He should never have asked poor Mellie here for this. It isn't giving him anything much he can work with, and the toll is enormous. He feels tired, very tired. She must be near collapse.

But it is over. They leave. On the way back to the hotel, nearly two in the morning now, no aurora in the darkness, Finnegan apologizes, sums up what they've learned in one sentence.

"Well, at least we've got that red cap to work on."

"And that's it," Melissa says. "I'm sorry, too. I wish I could have helped more." She wants to sleep, climb into that hard bed at the hotel and sleep.

"Listen, Melissa, you going to be O.K.? You still want that noon flight? I'll change it for you."

"No, no. I want that flight; I need to get out of here now. God, that poor little girl, that poor woman."

Melissa will have this to trouble her forever. That blade, those strong hands, the way the little one couldn't understand the hurt or why Mommy wouldn't come help.

Finnegan drops her off. "I'll see you at nine, right?"

"Right," she says. "Nine o'clock." She smiles at him. "Thanks. I'm sorry it didn't help much."

He smiles back, reaches out to touch her shoulder, give it a squeeze. In

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the room, five minutes later, she can barely get out of her clothes. In seconds she is fast asleep. Her dreams are not good.

V

AN INCESSANT, annoying telephone ring brings Melissa up from the depths. She slaps at it, knocks the receiver off the hook, fumbles around to find it on the night table, brings it to her ear. Finnegan?

"Hello," she manages. What could he want at — what time is it, 5:30 in the morning?

"Mellie, it's Dad. I'm sorry to wake you up, but I have something I have to show you, sweetie."

"Dad?" She shakes her head a bit to throw off a few cobwebs. Melchior calling her now? "Dad, what's the matter? What are you doing calling now?"

"I said I was sorry, sweetie, but this is something I just have to show you. I've been up all night thinking about this."

"Dad, I have a plane to catch at noon in Minneapolis."

"This won't take long, Mellie. Please. You'll still make your plane. Trust me."

"All right, all right. Are you coming by here to show me this thing?"

"I'm here now, Mellie. Down in the lobby. Just get down here as soon as you can, and I'll take you there, all right? Please, sweetie."

God, it must be important. She takes a deep breath, tries to come up fully from the depths of her sleep, from those new, cold dreams.

"O.K., Dad. Give me a few minutes, and I'll get down there. And get me a cup of coffee, O.K.?"

"You got it, sweetie. One cup of coffee, no sugar, two creams."

"O.K., O.K.," she says, and hangs up, struggles to get her legs over the side, rises, stumbles into the bathroom and splashes water on her face, brushes her teeth.

In ten minutes she's down in the lobby. Melchior says they can talk on the way. He has to show her something; it's important. They leave. Father and daughter, heading toward frozen Lake Minnetoksak and holes in the thick ice.

Finnegan has been up all night, too, thinking about what he saw. There

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was something about the face that rings a bell, something about that cap. The more he thinks about it, the more he thinks he knows the murderer, but he can't quite put two and two together. That red baseball cap. Those rough hands. He's been wrestling with it all night.

His mind drifts to thoughts of breakfast finally, giving up the struggle with his subconscious and its hazy memory.

Two or three times a week, Finnegan gets up early so he can stop in at the Little House diner and have a western omelet, hash browns, sausage patties, rye toast, and scalding coffee.

The thought of the coffee gets him up out of the bed. He likes the Little House. It's warm, comfortable, and cheap.

It hits him. The Little House, that red baseball cap. Up at the counter, usually with his back to the table where Finnegan sits. Damn. Always with that friendly smile, those big ham hands wrapped around a mug of coffee. Melchior O'Malley. Old lonely, silent Melchior. Christ.

Melissa. Sweet mother, Finnegan thinks, how will he tell her about this, tell her that he thinks her dad is the murderer, the vicious butcher who could do that to a kid?

He shoves on his pants, shrugs his way into a bulky knit sweater, pads barefoot into the kitchen, dials the hotel, asks for her room, waits for her to pick up. He'll tell her he's got news, something important, and then drive over there and explain it to her face-to-face, tell her what he thinks, get it over with.

There's no answer. He lets it ring: still no answer. He calls back to the front desk. The girl there, too damn cheerful for this time of the morning, tells him that Melissa left with a man just a few minutes before. Her father, the girl thinks; she thought she heard Melissa say that as the two of them walked out the door.

Oh God. With Melchior.

Finnegan runs back up the stairs to the bedroom, shoves his feet into socks and shoes, grabs his coat, whispers to his wife that he'll be back later, and goes back down the stairs, out to the garage and the tired old departmental Dodge that he drives.

The farm; that's where he'll go. Maybe Finnegan can get there in time to stop things from happening. If what he fears is what Melchior has planned. . . . Finnegan doesn't want to think about that. Just drive. Fast.

* * *

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But Mel and Melissa aren't at the farm. They're a few miles north of Lake Minnetoksak. Melchior is talking, explaining things.

"It's been strange, Mellie, really strange since you moved away. After I left tonight, I thought about it, about what I'd said, and I thought it was time to show you something. I think you'll understand, honey."

"Understand what, Dad?"

"Just bear with me for a few more minutes, O.K., sweetie?"

And Melissa shrugs her shoulders, hunches down some into the hard seat to ward off the bitterness of the predawn cold.

There's a thin streak of pale gray on the eastern horizon as they drive up the access road to the lake. A right turn past the old oaks, a quick left, and they drive right onto the ice. The lake is four miles around; the ice is two feet thick or more. The surface is dotted with ice shacks and parked cars. Lights shine from some of the shacks, people up fishing already.

Melchior drives the old pickup to his shack, over near the southern shore, maybe forty yards out onto the surface of the ice.

He parks; they get out and walk into the shack. There's a gas heater in there, already lit so the edge is off the cold. There's an ice auger over in the corner for drilling holes, a hammer for cracking them open each morning after they start to freeze, and two gas lamps, one of them lit, its mantle glowing to throw shadows into the corner of the shack.

Melchior takes some steaming water from a pan on top of the heater and pours it into a thick mug. He pulls a small jar of instant coffee out of a cardboard shoe box, carefully spoons out some of the coffee, drops it into the mug, stirs it a moment or two, then hands the coffee to Melissa while she stares out the door at the dawn. What is this all about?

Her father smiles disarmingly at her. "Come here," he says. "Please. I want you to see this."

He takes her by the hand, pulls her to the back of the shack, away from the hole out front that she'd noticed as they walked in.

There's another hole there, a huge one, four or five times as big around as the normal twelve-inch-diameter hole used for fishing. He must have used the auger several times and then pounded away with the hammer to clear a hole this big. There's a thick rope coiled by the side of the hole. One end of it leads down into the black water.

"I came out here a couple of hours ago and got the heater started up, hammered open the holes again, sort of got things ready for you" he says,

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walking over to the rope and grabbing it where it emerges from the water. "Now help me pull this up, and you'll see why, sweetie."

She does, wondering what's going on as they start to pull. The effort takes a while, and Melissa starts to think after a few minutes that she maybe doesn't want to know what's at the other end of the rope. It feels heavy. Too damn heavy. Tugging it in is hard work. What's he got in mind here?

She stops. "Dad, what's going on? I don't like this."

He turns to stare at her, hard, the old anger showing. "Just pull, Melissa. Just do it." He turns back to the task.

Melissa helps; there doesn't seem to be anything else to do. They pull for a good ten minutes more. The rope is cold and hard. The water down at the bottom never gets much above freezing year-round, but things live down there; the rope is covered with green slime, tiny snails, and long, stringy plants.

Something bumps against the bottom of the ice, just a few feet away from the hole. They tug more slowly.

Melissa can't take her eyes off the hole as the rope pulls the thing clear.

It's a tarpaulin, wrapped around something and then sewn shut, a big concrete block tied to the bottom of it. They pull the tarp out from the hole and onto the ice. Melchior turns to smile reassuringly at his daughter, takes his deer knife, and cuts the fishing line that has sewn the thing tight. It parts with precise little pops as he takes his time opening things up.

As he cuts, Melissa can see inside. There is a piece of worn blue cloth, torn and shredded. There is a body, gray but preserved in the depths of the lake. A face. Melissa can't turn away. Wants to, but can't.

It's Mary. It's her mother.

Melissa drops the rope, backs away. She turns to leave. She notices a red baseball cap sitting on the top of the upturned crate that serves as Melchior's table in the shack. Jesus. She freezes.

"Help me finish this, Mellie. It's so cold, my fingers go numb."

She turns back and goes to help him. She's part of this now, she tells herself; she has to finish it. She's starting to remember something, gets little flashes of it as she helps her father pull the tarp away from the body.

"That's good," Melchior says at last as he straightens the body a bit. He

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turns to look at his daughter.

"I thought you'd want to know about this, see her one more time. I found her like this in the tarp last November, still perfect, after all these years."

Oh God. Melissa struggles to keep herself sane, to not just scream and run. She looks down at the body, shakes her head, shivers, starts to lose it. "You're insane, Daddy. You're sick. You need help. Let me drive you back to town. We'll get this all taken care of; everything will be fine, just fine."

She's babbling, talking too damn fast. This is all way beyond belief.

Her father has a puzzled expression on his face.

"I just thought you'd want to know that she's been O.K., down in the cold. I thought you'd want to know that before you headed back south to that island," he says.

Melissa tries to be calm, tries to slowly back away. She can get out that door and run, get to another shack, get some help. She is thinking very clearly now, seeing it all with crystalline clarity. She knows she has to run, get away from him, get help somehow.

She takes one step back, another, but then Melchior blocks her path to the door, says, "I can't let you leave just yet, sweetie. You have to stay for just a few more minutes. I have one more thing we have to do; that's all."

So she tries to get past him, tries to elbow her way past him and out the door.

They struggle, and Melchior is much the stronger, wiry and quick no matter his age. He stops her, shakes her hard once by the shoulders, and then shoves her down.

She falls onto her mother, puts her hand down to break the fall, and places it right on her mother's arm. The flesh is gray, icy and cold, incredibly cold.

That pulse, that throb hits her. She is watching a much younger Melchior, a strong young man in his prime, angry, drunk, brutal, who holds a knife, the one he uses to gut and dress the deer he kills.

He is shoving her around the room; he slaps and then hits her with a fist — hard. There are throbbing waves of pain in her jaw, her cheekbone, her eye. Her face is wet from tears and blood. She wipes her eyes, and her hands are covered in red. She prays that he'll leave little Melissa alone. That's what started this fight, her saying he shouldn't be touching their

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daughter like that, in those places, talking all the time about doing more. It's just not right.

There is a raised hand, that knife, a bright flash of reflected sunlight from the window of her bedroom that bursts off the blade to blind her for a moment. She shuts her eyes, opens them, and sees a final maniacal smile on Melchior's face as the blade goes up and down and up and down until there is nothing.

VI

ROBERT FINNEGAN makes it to the farmhouse in twenty-seven minutes. It is obvious immediately that no one is there: no truck in the yard, no lights, no activity. He gives the place a quick once-over anyway; the door is unlocked when he tries it.

Then he stops to think it through. Where else? What makes sense from Melchior's perspective?

The lake, of course. Minnetoksak. Where Mel's wife was thought to have drowned. Where he keeps that fishing shack. Where he wears that damned red cap as he sits out in front of the shack and waits patiently for the fish to bite.

Finnegan runs back to his battered Dodge, cranks it, floors it, spins on the ice-covered gravel of the drive, roars away toward the lake, another three miles down the road.

"I had to do that to her, you understand? I just had to stop her, Mellie. She said she was going to go to the police about it, about us, sweetie, about how much I loved you.

"I'm not saying it was right, what I did to her. But she just got on me so much about it, about what I was doing to my daughter."

That smile again, as he remembers it. That cold smile. "I was just touching you; that's all. She just didn't understand, sweetie. You were always so pretty. And you liked it, Mellie; you really did. You told me so."

He shook his head. "She pushed and pushed at me until I had to take her up to her room and shut her up. I had to do it to protect you, Mellie.

"I loved her so, sweetie, but I just couldn't stand it when she got like that. I don't know, I just loved you even more, I guess. That's all. I just loved you more."

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He is waving the knife around as he explains all this. Melissa sits there, on the ice, next to her mother's frozen gray body, and listens to him. Water from the hole has splashed onto the ice where she is sitting and has soaked through her blue jeans. Her rear and her crotch are very cold. The chill seems to soak all the way through her.

Melissa shivers. She's starting to remember things that she had put away forever. Memories frozen away for twenty years crack loose and climb out of the dark hole where they've been hidden. She remembers his face above hers, smiling and kissing her cheek. She remembers him touching her, the way it felt so rough.

"It just happened; that's all," he explains, breaking into her past. "It was her birthday. It started out so happy, and then . . . nothing on purpose, Mellie. It just happened. She just egged me on until it happened." He looks at the knife.

Melissa remembers: noise, shouts and thumps from her mother's room — then silence. Melissa remembers waiting a few minutes, cautiously opening the door to her own room and looking out. No one there. The back door slammed; her father's heavy footsteps crunched through the old, hard snow as he walked out toward the barn. Quickly then, knowing he might come right back, she ran up the stairs, anxious to comfort Mommy.

Little Mellie knocked on her mother's door. No answer. Knocked again, a bit louder, afraid to bring Daddy back if she was too loud. No answer. She opened the door, peeked in. Mommy was on the bed, sprawled, arms wide. And there was blood everywhere, like when Daddy killed the chickens. Blood on the curtains, even splattered on the window glass.

Mellie wondered what this all meant. "Mommy?" she finally got up the nerve to ask. "Mommy, you all right?"

No answer. Mellie walked over to look at Mommy's face. She loved her mother's smile, that happy laugh. But this was a nothing face: no smile, no laugh.

Mellie turned to leave, and there was Daddy.

He sighed, disappointed. "She had to learn, Mellie, and now look what's happened. She just had to learn."

He reached out to hold his daughter by the shoulders.

"Did you hurt her, Daddy?"

"She made me, sweetie. She was going to tell on us, and we couldn't have that, could we?"

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Mellie shook her head no. This was all so very hard to understand. She turned to look at Mommy, turned back to see Daddy's smile, Daddy's cold, frozen smile.

She wanted to cry, but Daddy shook his head no, shushed her, and moved her over so he could sit next to her on the side of the bed. He leaned over. Melissa tried to move away, felt Mommy's cold left arm against her bottom, and screamed, hard, once, before Daddy started playing.

After, while Melissa lay next to her mother's body and pretended to sleep, Daddy cleaned the room. Melissa listened to the quiet rub and tap of his towel against the bloody windowpane as he cleaned the splattered glass. In the morning, Mommy was gone, and Melissa believed Daddy's story of how Mommy had just walked away. Melissa couldn't remember it any other way.

All this at age five. All of this closed off, sealed off — a whole part of her life that her mind wouldn't let her recall.

Where was her early childhood? Where was reality? She'd thought it happy enough — Mommy's smiling face and Daddy's hard work on the farm. There were hazy memories, brief snatches of snowmen, of sleds, of hot chocolate and marshmallows. How much of that was real? How much was blocked off in an icy part of her mind that hid the horror, the pain of what he'd done?

Now, here, the ice that surrounds those memeories is beginning to crack, to break apart. Melissa can see her past — a jolting, horrific reality.

Melchior is very calm. "January seventh," he says. "I celebrate it every year. January seventh. Her birthday. God, it was cold, worse than this. Twenty years ago to the day."

He lowers the knife, smiles. "That was the time we finally did it, Mellie, you and me, remember? That time with her, and never again. I stopped everything after that, for the longest time, and you forgot all about it. I stopped just for her, but God, I wanted to, sweetie. You grew up so beautiful."

He's proud of himself, proud of the self-control he had practiced starting twenty years before. "And now that I found her, I started making her presents. Good presents."

His smile broadens. "You came back, too, Mellie. Right on time. So I know things are going to be all right."

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Melissa sees it all. January seventh. That's why she can do this thing, see these visions, but only on this day, this horrible day. January seventh. God, he's a monster.

"Presents, Daddy? Oh Christ. The woman? The little girl?"

"Woman? Little girl?" He frowns. "I don't know what you're talking about, sweetie."

"I think you do, Daddy. I think you know."

He shakes his head, trying to put it all together, concentrating.

"Maybe," he says. "Maybe the presents weren't right. That girl wouldn't be quiet, Mellie. I had to shush her. It wasn't perfect, like with you and me."

"God, Daddy. Jesus. You killed them, those poor people." Her voice is unsteady, shaking. She stares at her father. "You killed Mom; you raped me." Her voice is rising, near hysteria. She forces herself to calm down, to talk her way out of this, end it. "Dad, you've got to stop. This has all got to stop."

"No, it doesn't," he says. "You're back, Mellie. You came back to me."

He starts moving toward her, actually putting the knife away in his belt and then unbuckling the brass belt buckle. His Melissa has come back to him.

Melissa bolts, scrambles on all fours, and gets by him, makes it to the door, crashes through it, and then clambers outside, struggles to her feet, and runs, slipping badly on the ice. It is light out now; she can see where she's going. She heads for the shoreline.

"Mellie, sweetie. Wait!" Her father comes out behind her. "You don't understand. Wait a minute!"

She runs, still slipping, falling with every third or fourth frenzied stride. She should have gone to a nearby shack, even if it was farther out on the ice, she realizes. She could have gotten help that way. Somebody to stop Melchior. She hears a car engine behind her, thinks it must be him in that damn truck, turns to look.

Melchior is trotting along behind her, taking his time on the ice, not slipping so badly despite his bad leg, walking calmly, but catching up with her.

She'll never make it; she'll never get away from him. She scrambles onto the shoreline, then up into the frozen snow that lines the lake. She turns once to see how far back he is.

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That engine noise was a car that's roaring toward them on the ice. It's aimed at Daddy.

Melchior turns to look, then dodges to the side as the car narrowly misses him, then skids and turns completely around on the ice.

It bumps onto the shoreline, not ten yards away from Melissa. Finnegan is behind the wheel.

"Get in," he says.

"No. We don't need to. Look."

Melchior has his arms raised. He is walking toward them, limping some now on that bad leg. As they watch, he takes out the knife, throws it away so it skitters across the ice.

"Mellie," he says loudly as he walks closer. "You don't understand. I'd never hurt you, Mellie. Never."

"Hi, Bob," he says when he gets to them, smiling in the cold, vapor rising from that friendly grin. "Maybe you can help me explain things to Mellie. Tell her I love her."

Finnegan gets out, walks over toward Melchior, takes Mel's right hand and brings it around behind. Does the same with the left. Cuffs him.

And then, while Melissa watches in stunned silence — as though it were a movie, not real at all — Melchior pulls free from Finnegan, shoulders the detective down onto the ice, and starts trotting back toward the shack, running as fast as the slick surface and his bad left leg will let him.

Finnegan scrambles to his feet, runs after him, Melissa after them both.

Finnegan can't quite catch him, and Melchior makes it first to the shack. Finnegan gets there a few long seconds later, and Melissa a few seconds after that. As she enters, there is only Finnegan, hands thrust down into the black hole in the ice.

He is grasping something, hanging on for all he's worth, almost goes in himself, and then suddenly loses it, falls back onto the ice, holds his freezing hands out in supplication.

Mother Mary is gone, back into her grave. Melchior has kicked her in, and then followed, and Finnegan couldn't hang on to him, couldn't bring Mel back from that deep cold, that perpetual preserving chill of the bottom of Lake Minnetoksak.

Melissa finds a tattered blanket in a corner, wraps it around Finnegan's arms. The two of them watch for a good five minutes, say nothing. There's

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no chance of diving in there to rescue anybody. Melchior is gone, down into the cold that he loves so much.

In the distance, they hear a siren. The backup that Finnegan had radioed for on his way to the lake is finally arriving.

It is very cold. Melissa, hugging Finnegan, thinks about her island, about boyfriend Billy, about warm seas and charter sailing. She wonders if she'll ever really escape the cold.

By the next day, ice covers the hole. There is nobody to break it clear; and in another two days, it is smooth, as though the hole had never existed.

They find the two bodies once the ice is out of the lake in May. Melissa flies up for the funeral. She stands with Finnegan and his wife. As the bodies are lowered into the earth, first her mother and then Melchior, she cries. The tears are mostly for her father. There was so much so good about him. It's still hard to accept. She thought she knew him, loved him. She thought she knew herself.

It is cool and wet in Mankato, light drizzle, temperature in the low fifties, but as her father's coffin is lowered, as the dirt is thrown on the top, Melissa, at last, begins to feel warm.

OKAY, YA CAUGHT ME. NOW I SUPPOSE YOU'LL BE WANTIN' THOSE THREE WISHES FOR OPEN SORES, NERVE PARALYSIS, AND PHYSICAL MUTILATION...

MARTIN NABS A LEPERCHAUN

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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

Gerald's Game, Stephen King, Viking, $23.50

The Time Patrol, Poul Anderson, Tor, $21.95

I GUESS I must have reviewed a score of Stephen King books by now, most of them in these pages. And they have been variously good, taken as things in themselves, but more important always very interesting.

I think one of the most interesting parts is that King has been around for a very long time, now, and in that time he has, among other things, identified various people as being better than he; as having come along since the debut of Stephen King, and having improved on the original model. For instance, Clive Barker.

But that is not true. Barker is interesting and filled with various stripes of accomplishment, but you are not going to tell me that he is better than King, because he isn't.

Then there is or was Peter Straub — I think his first name is Peter — who apparently impressed King because he quit writing "quality" novels in order to write the "kind of thing" King writes. Well, Peter Straub wrote better of "the kind of thing" King writes than he did of "quality novels," true, but no one is as good as King at writing the kind of thing, etc., etc.

And what I do mean, "the kind of thing" King writes? No one — no one — in literature, living or with negligible exceptions dead, writes more different kinds of literature. No one. From the potboilers of "The Breathing Method" and "Shawshank Rebellion," I think it was — and, mind you, these are two very different types of potboiler—* to the nearly flawless and very literary "The Body" — to name three of the four stories in just one book, *Dif-*

* *(A) I do not mean the usual scorn when I use the term "potboiler." ALL I mean is that these stories reflect no improvement on the model of story they are. Apart from that, they are perfectly good stories. (B) I'll bet you were wondering if you'd ever see another footnote from me.*

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ferent Seasons — King does it all, and quite a bit of the time better, than anyone else.

My point, really, is that you have to pay no literal attention to what King says about his work. You have to pay attention, instead, to what what he says *means*, which is another thing indeed, and tricky, besides. But if my reading between the lines is anywhere near right, what King means is that he just writes — so to speak — whereas some of his friends think hard and long about what they write, and this impresses King, sometimes quite a bit. Fortunately, apart from creating a body of King statements which are patently *not* true, he has not fallen into the trap of thinking about his work on the model of Barker, Straub, and some other people. Until he falls into that trap — and he is showing absolutely no sign of doing so — King will continue to amaze and frequently to invent, and *nobody* will in actuality come near him.

Case in point: *Gerald's Game* is a very good book. And it is unique in some ways, all of them also good.

It has, for one thing, a complete, unified, and satisfactory ending, which is not true of King books generally — though it has been more frequent lately. For another, it is a more or less straightforward slasher novel — although it speaks in passing of events at Castle Rock, which events are part of an undoubted fantasy/horror series.

Let us speak about that for a moment.

Horror writing traditionally divides into two quite distinct and separate types; the type with a fantasy element, and the type without. No other writer that I know of has connected the two; certainly no writer of the stature of King, than whom one gets no taller.

I don't know why it's never been done before, now that it's been done. It gives one an extra turn, it does, to think that while Jessie is going through extended but straightforward agonies in one part of Maine, the Devil has literally set up shop in another part of the very same Maine. Never mind who Jessie is, for the moment: think about it; what King is saying is that the line between slasher events and Devilish events does not exist. That's breathtaking. It says that there is no safety from the Devil — or any other supernatural force — just because you happen to be for a moment chopped into little pieces by the machete, or whatever, of a merely insane psychopath. Hmm. Bad enough that King, like others before him, blurred the previously longstanding division between fantasy fantasy and religious fantasy.

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Now we get King's invention of the blur between fantasy and reality. Oh, hmm indeed!

But there he is, and here he is, telling the story of Jessie, fortyish and graying — though she conceals the latter fact from her husband of now many years, Gerald — letting Gerald handcuff her to the bed in their deserted summer home to play a little game. Which game, though she is wearing nothing but a pair of Victoria's Secret panties, she suddenly realizes she does not merely dislike, she hates it to the point where in a fit of desperation she kicks Gerald so hard that he has a heart attack and dies. Which leaves her handcuffed to the bed. In a deserted summer home. Without food, clothing, or even, at first, water. But with a stray dog — who takes a definite and sickening interest in Gerald's body — and with a visitor in the night who smells of things long dead, and looks it, and offers her a box of mixed jewelry and bits of bone, and carries a chainsaw, and may even be real.

That's essentially it. King winds this story through from the beginning — Gerald is dead by Page 19 —to the end flawlessly. Enroute, he reveals, at a measured pace, that Jessie is not the all together person she might be taken for. There is the matter of the eclipse of the sun, and what happened during it while Jessie was just beginning puberty, and that is particularly well done.

But the affair of the possible nighttime visitor is also beautifully handled, from the beginning to its just-right ending, and while some may question the likelihood of its occurrence coincidentally with the entrapment of Jessie, I think that is one of the givens. That is, we begin with the deserted summer home, the dog, and the possible nighttime visitor once Gerald is dead; that is where the story starts, and if you didn't have that, you'd have to have something else.

Finally, we have the means by which Jessie ultimately escapes. It is a *tour de force*, from beginning to the end in the Mercedes; it will, guaranteed, cause you to squirm and put the book down at intervals, and then pick it up again helplessly.

I have said before that King is a writer of broader range than any other, and furthermore that even when he scamps the ending, or displays curious dislexias — Hearst for Hurst in car shifters, platens for keys in a typewriter — or commits any other of a dozen supposedly grievous sins — it basically doesn't matter except to purists (of whom, of course, I am one). The basic idea of his story is always so good that you disregard the glitches (like the dislexias, of which, by the way, *Gerald's Game* is as far as I know

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completely free), and fill in the blanks — or, in the case of *Misery*, create blanks — in the endings.

But you do not have to do this in the event of *Gerald's Game*. You just have to sit there and enjoy this book, and thank the good lord that King not only shows no sign of slowing down, he shows every sign of getting even better. Good on you, Stephen King — good on you.

It's been a long time since I reviewed a book by Poul Anderson. This was not always true. The first years of this column — which started in *Galaxy* Magazine, in the late 1960s — were replete with Anderson. Why? Because he was our foremost science adventure writer, because he invented things about the form which no one else had thought of, because he was enormously prolific of truly good writing, and because I liked it; I liked it a lot, and I wanted you to understand — to the best of my ability — why you liked it, too.*

At any rate, Poul is now 65 or so, and his daughter is married to Greg Bear — who is also not quite a spring chicken anymore — and time, as I dimly recall someone saying, flies. And Tor has now sent me a copy of *The Time Patrol*.

At the outset, let me say that the Time Patrol stories were for the most part just a minor part of Anderson's varied adventure stories. They were never of the stature of his Polesotechnic League stories, for just one instance, and of a dozen other ventures into different types of tale — Flandry of Terra, for another — some of which were done because other people were doing or had done roughly similar stories which Anderson then decided to turn on their sides and sandpaper a little, to see if there wasn't something in them that other people had not quite found.

Let me say further that Tor is rather wrong in calling this, in the flap copy, "one of science fiction's best-loved story cycles," because it is not, after all, the first or even the second or third story cycle by Anderson that one recalls. But I think what the reason for this is is that this is one of the more difficult Anderson story cycles. The Polesotechnic League and Flandry of Terra take place in a future, and Anderson was free to invent, and the reader was free to roam that future *ad libitum*. The Time Patrol stories,

* *If not actually you, then your father. Possibly your grandfather or your grandmother, come to that. Time flies, I suppose, whereas the* perception *of time swims. I swear to you it was only yesterday that I did my first of these, the exchange of letters between your father — or possibly your grandmother — and me.*

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on the other hand, all take place in the past — a real past, which the Patrol is, precisely, dedicated to preserving.

And, Anderson saw little profit in dealing with the familiar slices of history. 1066 and 1492, and all that, are dates just about everyone knows. No, if he was going to write a Time Patrol series — not exactly a fresh idea, on the face of it — he was, being Anderson, going to do something different. And what he did was go into the cracks — the real cracks, but cracks — in most people's understanding of history. The result is a lot of story material featuring names like Gisco and Burhmund and Castelar. Perfectly fine names, from our undoubted past, but not the names that come immediately to mind, do they?

It is a curious and rewarding book. A couple of years ago, Tor brought out *The Shield of Time*, a complete novel about Manse Everard — the principal actor — and the Time Patrol. Now what they've done is package up all the other Time Patrol stories, plus a new "novel" — actually a novella —called "Star of The Sea," and offer them to you in a sort of omnibus form. And what you get from reading it is a sense of Anderson's truly impressive accomplishment, if what you want is a series of stories about little-known but real crisis points in the time line leading up to us —and beyond us the Danellans, but that's almost beside the point.

What you get if you want a series of stories about riproaring adventure, however, is another matter. Riproaring adventure is not what Anderson had in mind, in this case. Oh, there is some. But it is clear I was not, and is not, Anderson's primary interest.

We all know how any story of any Time Patrol series begins. (A) The discontented hero figure spots a mysterious ad in the newspaper which he answers after some soul-searching, and (B) he discovers, finally, that what it is is a recruitment ad for a Time Patrol, which emanates from a future when time travel has been accomplished and whose mission it is to make sure that the time line which led up to that future stays intact. This is the given from which all Time Patrol stories stem, and not a one of them — not even Anderson's — makes real sense as far as the enabling mechanism goes. A computer set to monitor all of the past is all that's actually required, and Manse Everard, and all the other recruits of all the other authors, need never have been. I will say this for Anderson; he fudges around that fact better than most. But that is not, as I said, Anderson's primary interest in any case.

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Other authors have their patrol agents springing out of thin air and fighting terrific gun battles with various time pirates. Anderson does that too, but he does it almost as a by-the-way. He concentrates, instead, on what this all means to the people involved — short term to the various actors on stage in a particular episode, long term to the Time Patrolmen, who see the long swings of the pendulum over the centuries. And the thing is that the people involved in the short term can, if they be lucky, come to a happy end. But the Patrolmen can not. They see the sorrow and deprivation that almost inevitably results from their actions . . . and they know, without the shadow the faintest hope that sooner or later they will be killed. It's just a matter of when their luck runs out. They seem to take this rather philosophically, but it casts a certain pall over the proceedings from the reader's point of view.

This in no way can be one of science fiction's best-loved story cycles. Anderson has penetrated to the heart of time patrol stories everywhere, and unlike most other writers, he has not drawn back from it. There are detail problems with some of the stories — just as there are detail triumphs, and rather more triumphs than problems — but in the end, that's the central message of these stories; you can win, but you won't live.

Well, of course, you won't live in any case. But few writers are as ready to admit it as Anderson is in this case.

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Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Boy's Life, Robert R. McCammon (Pocket, paper, 578pp, $5.99; audio abridgement read by Richard Thomas (Simon & Schuster Audioworks, 2cass, 180min., $16.00)

WHEN I DRIVE long distances, I often pick up audiotapes of books so I can, in effect, have someone read me a story while I drive. That's how I came upon the works of Martha Grimes and Tony Hillerman, for instance; that's how I "read" *Prairy Earth* by William Least-Heat Moon and came to know Olive Ann Burns's wonderful *Cold Sassy Tree.*

Usually, though, I confine my listening to "out-of-genre" books, and to authors whose works I don't know. Robert R. McCammon's writing I have known for some time, ever since he first started popping up with short stories in anthologies and Alan Rodgers's wonderful old *Night Cry* magazine. I admired his work then, and said so, and have said so since. And because he has developed a large following, I felt no need to read his novels for review — with exceptions, I generally try to read for this column books that aren't going to be recognized immediately by a large audience.

But as I headed out for a trip to Myrtle Beach, there wasn't anything that really tickled my fancy outside the genre. And there was McCammon's *Boy's Life.* The title reminded me of a brilliant work of autobiography by a mainstream author, which was both encouraging and off-putting; and it was read for audiotape by Richard Thomas, who did a fine job of reading *Cold Sassy Tree;* I figured, What can I lose?

I lost nothing, folks; I gained much. Even in its abridged audiotape presentation, *Boy's Life* is far more than a mere horror story; rather it is worthy, both in ambition and execution, of pushing its way out of a genre whose purpose is to arouse a single emotion and into

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the lives of a broader audience, the one that seeks character and meaning, vision and the wide range of human feeling.

What McCammon has wrought is, not a story of horror, but a story of hunger, love, and death in a small southern town, where the river contains a dangerous and hungry serpent that is propitiated by annual blood sacrifices, and where the narrator is a kid who rides his bike all over town and takes piano lessons in the home of a matched set of quarrelsome old ladies and, oh yes, gets caught up in a murder investigation that almost gets him killed.

The fantasy and the reality of decades-ago life in the deep south merge in a way that reminds me of Bradbury without the rhapsodies. From the bone-chilling scene where the narrator watches his father, a milkman, run from his truck and leap into a bottomless lake, trying to save a man hand-cuffed inside a sinking car, to the terrifying scene in a flooded-out cabin where the river serpent bites a dog in half and then comes after the narrator and his younger black companion, McCammon shows that he hasn't lost a speck of his talent for horror. But this is horror, not for its own sake, not because the author thought of something really icky and built a story around showing it to us, but rather horror as a part of a larger story, as a part of *life.*

After listening to the tape and being moved and exalted by the story, I bought the book and skimmed it, realizing that to turn *Boy's Life* into a three-hour read, the abridger had to chop the book to bits, leaving out an astonishing amount. Like a movie adaptation, the audiotape did not really do justice to what McCammon wrote. The book is even better, richer, more full of the details of life and with far more story than any three-hour tape could possibly contain. But this does not mean the audio version is "bad," any more than the film of *Gone with the Wind* is "bad" because it leaves out half the book. More than ever before, the experience of these two versions of McCammon's story has shown me that reading a book aloud is a different medium with its own possibilities. The audio version is more of a mystery novel — who killed that man in the car? — than the book as a whole, which is so much richer that the mystery is only one of the threads instead of the main structure. But it is an *excellent* story, no less so than the longer, fuller life created in the book.

Strange Devices of the Sun and Moon, Lisa Goldstein (TOR, 1992)

* * *

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Goldstein is one of our best writers. Indeed, with *Tourists* and *A Mask fo the General* I came to the conclusion that she simply *was* the best writer in our field today, bar none. Her view of reality is so quirky but true, her characterization so sympathetic yet brutally honest, her writing so extravagantly clear, that I honestly thought she couldn't write a bad book.

Well, I still believe that. With all the mistakes in the making of *Strange Devices of the Sun and Moon* it *should* be a bad book, and it still isn't. And while it is not the polished, perfect work that some of her previous books have been, it is still a book that rewards you well for the reading of it, and it is still a book that affirms Goldstein's talent.

The setting is Elizabethan London, just before Shakespeare. There are really two stories spinning along at once: The story of Christopher Marlowe, poet, dramatist, and spy, who slips easily from the world of palace intrigue back into the free-for-all society of London writers; and the story of Alice Wood, a widowed bookseller struggling to maintain her independence in a world that does not know how to deal with a female doing business in her own right.

It is the story of Alice Wood that you want to read, for hers is the tale that reflects Goldstein's imagination instead of just her research. Alice had a son, you see, who disappeared, but in the course of the story he comes back, and fancies himself king. This is treason, of course, and because various factions want to make use of him, he comes to the attention of the government. However, there is a far deeper game being played, for this boy is not king of England, but rather the heir of the king and queen of Faerie, and a terrible battle is looming in which this young man's role will be pivotal. Who will possess him. Not Alice Wood, for he is not really hers — her own child was stolen from her in infancy, and she reared this prince of Faerie as a changeling in his place.

It is a delight to read Alice's story as she discovers the reality of Faerie, fights off an attempt by a one-time friend to marry her or destroy her, develops a friendship with a woman who, by any definition of the era, is a witch, and deals with the presence of a large and sometimes surly brownie in her house. Goldstein deftly gives us the feel of Elizabethan speech without beating us over the head with *forsooths* or lifting ludicrous quotes from Shakespeare or Marlowe and planting them whole in places where blank verse does not belong. And while she never gives us much of a personal stake in the struggle

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within Faerie, it is still interesting when seen through Alice's eyes.

The mistake in this book, the reason why a lesser writer would have failed utterly, is that Goldstein seems to have fallen in love with her research. Christopher Marlowe takes up fully half the pages of this book without ever amounting to anything — unless you already know a great deal about him and so would feel a great admiration for the clever way that Goldstein accounts for his death. But unless you bring attitudes about Marlowe to this book, you will find no particular reason for his story to have been included. He has no deep personal goal, beyond survival, that drives him; he has no hopes or plans that we can identify with; rather he lurches along, responding rather prosaically to whatever wind is blowing. This may be realistic, of course, but it is hardly the stuff that great novels are made of; Marlowe doesn't even have some knd of epiphany that shows us why we have spent so many pages reading about his life. Marlowe seems to be in this book solely because the author fell in love with him and then neglected to put within the pages of this novel anything that would evoke that same response in *us*. His emptiness was so frustrating that I found myself constantly tempted to skip ahead to the next Alice section; I even found myself hoping that Goldstein would at least tie him in with the authorship of Shakespeare's plays, dumb as that would have been, just so there would be *some* reason for having read so much about him. No such luck. Shakespeare is barely mentioned, and Marlowe, who has his hour on the stage, is given nothing important to do, so that when he leaves in a quick little death scene, we hardly miss him.

A flaw? Yes, and a serious one —but *Strange Devices* is a Goldstein novel, and therefore even with flaws is well worth reading. The story of Alice Wood is strong enough to carry us through; and now that Goldstein has worked out her mini-affair with Marlowe in the pages of this book, we can expect her next book to be aspark with the lightning of her inventiveness instead of being dampened by such humid study.

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Brian Aldiss is currently performing in his own play, "Kindred Blood in Kensington Gore," the story of what happens to Philip K. Dick in the Afterlife. His mainstream novel, REMEMBRANCE DAY, will be published in England this fall. "Common Clay" is the first of two stories in this issue inspired by Mary Shelley's classic novel, FRANKENSTEIN. Brian visited Geneva on the trail of Byron, the Shelleys, and FRANKENSTEIN. He came away with another kind of inspiration, that of Geneva. Another monster came alive on its streets.

Common Clay

By Brian W. Aldiss

FIRST CAME the pale objects. They were ranked without system in the foreground, extending some way toward the flat, distant horizon. Just as it was impossible to gauge their scale, so it was impossible to determine what they were supposedly made of. Wood? Felt? Porcelain? There was no telling.

Next Emile brought up his cans of dilute oil paint, red, black, white. He allowed the colors to trickle thinly over the canvas. The pale objects became enmeshed in fine hairs, or perhaps in ropes, or perhaps on cobwebs spun from the spinnerets of demented spiders.

Emile began the canvas at about 11:30 in the morning. He worked concentratedly, ignoring the faint, continuous roar of traffic from the town below. Before darkness fell, the painting would be finished, and eventually stacked along the wall with all Emile's other canvases. As he worked, he talked aloud.

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"You don't admit nature with its impurities. . . . A revolution in thought. . . . The fools will have to learn one day. . . . Stay true to your principles, Emile, and one day. . . . Yes, they'll recognize your genius. That's all that matters. Running out of red again. . . . Soon I'll be finished. Get out of here and talk to someone."

But these days — now that he was growing older — he found the city more and more inhospitable. Apart from the drunken fools who lived on the floor below, there were fewer and fewer artists here: or fewer with whom Emile was in sympathy. He went out less often, frequented the local tavern less often, talked to fewer people. Talked more to Lisbet.

Lisbet was the woman in a raincoat who stood at the back of Emile's large room, waiting for a bus.

Emile hated Lisbet less than he had in the past. After all, they had something in common. Both in their hidden dreams dreamed of leaving Geneva.

"Why don't you move to Paris?"

People like tourists had been asking that question of Emile years ago. He stayed on in the city of Geneva without articulating the answer, though in his heart he knew it well. True artists went to Paris rather than stay in a hard-hearted commercial city like Geneva. Paris or even California.

It was many years since Emile arrived in Geneva. He mixed only with other bohemians. He and his friends lived the rebellious life of a community that feels itself in conflict with the smug bourgeois values flourishing round them. They painted, quarreled, argued, emoted; when they were particularly hungry, they would put on blue sweaters and trudge down to the lakeside to paint portraits of the tourists they despised.

The artistic community lived in the houses and tenements of two dilapidated streets, the Rue de la Grâce and the Rue Sous Mur, that ran in parallel. Here their lives, ladies, and illnesses were generally held in common. Their roofs were leaky, their rentals low. Behind these disreputable thoroughfares stood a high wall, part cliff, part hewn stone, that had once formed the basis of the ancient fortifications of Geneva; the Vieille Ville lay grandly on its eminence behind this wall, in a peace not shared by the rest of the city, and certainly not by the broken houses under threat of demolition at its foot.

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Below the two dilapidated streets, where the ground sloped steeply away, separated from them by strips of public garden, ran the modern city, the great grinding commercial world of Geneva, adorned by bus stations, taxi stands, bistros, and cumbrous gray office buildings without style.

Emile looked from his attic windows onto these gray buildings. There lived some of the very people, the soulless people, who would do away with the Rues de la Grâce and Sous Mur entirely to erect in their stead banks and offices given over to capitalist enterprise.

He felt the conflict between art and commerce to be particularly intense in Geneva. The city served not simply the banking interests of its own citizens, but of the whole country and much of the rest of Europe. Geneva was one of the capitals of international greed. The thin bellies of the artists stood as frail barriers against such materialism. Any artist who made a name for himself in that world — by selling canvases, for instance, to the smart galleries in the Boulevard Georges Ruiz-Brandt at the bottom of the hill — lost his standing and was invariably expelled from the artistic rookery: that is, if he did not leave voluntarily after receiving his first check. One artist who had left was Emile's friend Gaston Bouyat. Emile's ex-friend.

Gaston Bouyat had sold himself into the harsh world at the bottom of the hill, the modern Geneva. Emile never went there. He hated the place. It held all he had fled from. When on occasions he strolled out, say on a summer evening in pursuit of a woman, he would go in the opposite direction and climb the winding stone steps at the end of the Rue de la Grâce, ascending to the cobbles of the Vieille Ville.

The Old City had changed much of late. Once, a thriving community of artisans and craftsmen had lived there, making chairs and carts and carriages and objects of silver. An irresistible spirit of internationalism had swept the craftsmen away. Here Geneva's most famous artist — artist and socialist to the end of his days — Jean-Jacques Gubenstrade, had lived, a remote descendant of Courbet and something of a hero to Emile. Gubenstrade had managed to be a success in the great world and to remain true to his calling as an artist. He had never compromised. Picasso and Braque had dined at his table. Emile had seen Gubenstrade himself with his own eyes when he had first arrived in Geneva, a little old man in a crumpled black suit, walking slowly with a stick through the Vieille Ville. He had died a dozen years ago in a hospital for geriatric diseases, out in a new suburb.

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The ancient Vieille Ville had grown less without the living genius of Gubenstrade to preside over it. Gubenstrade's modest house, three stories of it and only a room thick, was now an electronics emporium, selling expensive fitments for the boudoirs of the rich. The deep-eyed windows of the area, which had once looked toward the mountains of the Haute-Savoie, recalling the graces of the prerevolutionary eighteenth century, were now restored and blinded by a cataract of luxury goods. Discreet signs, generally in gold or gilt, hung under wrought-iron balconies and against the stone caryatids of old doorways, proclaiming the names and goods of boutiques, fashion houses, lawyers, or jewelers. On their glass doors were exhibited the varieties of credit cards accepted within. And over one of these exclusive shops, in what was reputedly a luxurious penthouse, lived Emile's ex-friend, Gaston Bouyat; or, rather, here Gaston Bouyat kept a rarely visited apartment. For most of the year, Gaston lived in Palm Springs, California. Emile went in fear of turning a corner and running into his ex-friend.

Gaston had left. Emile had remained in the Rue de la Grâce. A garret room, its wallpaper surviving from a more florid era, had once served as studio and home to both Emile and Gaston. The room spanned the width of the house at the east end of the Rue de la Grâce, the most tumbledown of all the houses in that row, its outer wall supported by a large billboard bearing an advertisement for a Japanese television set. Integrity and acylic alike had been common coin between the two young men — until Gaston Bouyat deviated into representational realism and swelling bank accounts. Emile was now utterly alone in his garret — apart, that is, from his transitory women, itinerant male friends, and a cat who climbed over the broken roof tiles to visit him for a saucer of milk every morning. And Lisbet.

Gaston's name was no longer spoken in the garret. But everyone knew of him, knew of his desertion and his success. His name was probably more fragrant, and more often discussed, in boardrooms in Tokyo and Los Angeles. When Gaston had taken to representational sculpture, examples had found their way to those very boardrooms.

The garret smelled of linseed oil and old clothes and stale food. Its large skylight in the ceiling was shrouded with cobwebs. The windows facing south toward the Boulevard George Ruiz-Brandt were misted over with dirt. The old canvases turned with their faces to the wall exhibited

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the same air of defeat as Emile's broken couch with its covering of rugs.

In the farthest corner of the room, among abandoned stretchers and rolls of canvas, stood the almost life-size clay figure of Lisbet. It represented, in painstaking detail, a woman in a raincoat — a pretty woman with a pert nose — standing, umbrella in hand, waiting for a bus.

The figure was the work of the deserter, Gaston Bouyat, and was named after his Nordic model. Marking as she did the transformation of Gaston from creative to commercial artist, Lisbet had been spared Emile's destructive rage. Perhaps he gave her space as a monument to a once-close friendship, perhaps as a warning of how a good man could abandon his principles.

Emile's principles had formed long ago, when the sixties tailed off into the early seventies. He spoke openly of them as principles now, where once he had said, "It's what you've got to do." As ever, he painted in the manner of Tanguy, with the superimposition of Pollock-like effects and an occasional nod toward Jasper Johns. Although an earlier optimism had left him, Emile still retained his pride. The consolation for having no Name was that everyone in the Rue de la Grâce knew him by name.

Or they had until recently. Fewer familiar people than previously now frequented the Rue de la Grâce. Young men grew tired of being artists and went into computing or advertising. Emile accordingly became more of a hermit. More of his time was spent with Lisbet.

Even Lisbet had changed.

Once, Emile returned from an errand to find the clay figure looking out the window at the distant traffic below. She still held her umbrella. Her pert little nose was turned as if in curiosity toward the busy Boulevard Georges Ruiz-Brandt. Emile assumed one of his visiting friends had played a small joke on him; but he thought as he moved the figure back into the shadows that, after all, Geneva was — had been — the home of Victor Frankenstein's monster. Perhaps Lisbet was coming to life.

A few days later, he found Lisbet at the window again. This time he thought something different: that perhaps he was going mad with solitude and failure. But he quickly hid such reflections from himself.

On the following Saturday, the sham artists with no principles who lived on the floor below held a rowdy party. They played fast rock, the jungle beat of which rose and penetrated Emile's skull. He beat it up to the Vieille Ville and slept, or attempted to, in the doorway of an old church, as

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he had done on numerous occasions in his youth. Now he, too, was old. His bones ached, even when he had dosed himself with half a bottle of cheap Belgian gin.

At dawn he crept back to his garret, feeling the cold stiffening his muscles. On the stairway, outside the apartment of the drunken artists, he encountered Pief, one of the least obnoxious of the bunch. Pief greeted him warmly and said, "Hey, Emile, your lady friend came and joined the party."

"Who do you mean?"

"Lisbet, of course. Where have you been hiding her?"

"You're drunk." He pushed by and went on up the stairs.

Pief called after him, "Ask her why in hell she wouldn't take her raincoat off!"

Emile barged into his room. Pale by morning light, the clay figure stood among the canvases as usual. Her sharp, inquiring face was turned toward Emile. He walked over and inspected her. She did not move.

"Just stay quiet and wait for your damned bus," he said.

HE TOOK to pacing about the garret, orating to himself. Despite his loathing for most of the people he knew, he professed a great friendship for all mankind. "Especially women," he said. "Though you can't trust any of them.... I can remember when girls were nicer. These days they grumble so much. The new generation...."

His affection for individual women rarely lasted. Until Alema came along.

One morning, Emile was working at a new canvas in the garret, alone except for a friend who was sleeping off a hangover in a broken armchair. Emile was pouring a diluted mixture of cadmium red and raw umber, his faorite colors, from an old cat food can. He watched the liquid trickle on the canvas in those special squiggles only he could master, only he understood, when suddenly — in mid-pour, as it were — he stopped, put down the can, and walked out, down the three flights of dusty stairs, into the August sunshine.

If there was anything Emile hated more than the government, French imperialism, American imperialism, and the European Community, it was to be interrupted in mid-canvas. This morning was different. He simply left what he was doing, left the half-finished canvas on the floor, and went

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away. He strode through the busy town, hardly aware of the traffic that moved at a rate suggesting it intended to cross all Europe from north to south and east to west before the day was done and the last electronic cash-desk silent in the city.

Walking in a kind of daze, Emile found himself in the Secheval quarter of the town. He stood indecisively outside the Restaurant Boccaccio, the striped awning of which swooped out over the pavement. Its cafe area was fringed by oleanders in green tubs. The one waiter visible did not look askance at Emile. The few customers drinking at tables did not appear too hostile. Encouraged by these negatives, Emile selected a chair on the edge of the pavement, away from the entrance, ordered a cappuccino, and smoked a Philip Morris.

As he sat lost in thought over his coffee, four young people emerged from the dark interior of the restaurant, followed by the landlord. The Boccaccio landlord was a plump fellow. He came out with the group of four smiling broadly, protracting his farewells as if he had just been liberally tipped. But it was the young people who attracted Emile's immediate loathing, and of them the leading couple in particular.

The man bore every indication of being rich. He wore a white suit with — Emile could not stop himself from gripping the side of his table — pink-and-white shoes, the pink matching his silk shirt. Around the offensive young man's white panama hat, a scarlet scarf was tied, one end of which hung decoratively over one shoulder. He was handsome, with a small, fair mustache, laughing and walking with his girl as they strolled to the edge of the pavement. A casually possessive quality in his manner added to Emile's dislike.

The girl presented her profile to Emile as she walked. She was less of a period piece than her companion, and wore a nondescript blouse with blue jeans and sandals. He liked her figure, but it was her profile that most attracted Emile. Her hair was golden. A lock of it hung down over her forehead toward a small, neat nose. She was laughing with her mouth open as if slightly aghast at something the man was saying. It was that expression of mixed amusement and shrinking away that seized Emile's attention. He instantly wanted to know the girl, to possess her.

A large white Lagonda was parked illegally by the curbside. The four climbed in, laughing loudly, and drove away. Well, there had been many girls he wanted, and many of them had escaped. The fact had to be faced. He lit another cigarette.

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The proprietor of Boccaccio's stood under the edge of his awning, staring in the direction the Lagonda had driven, toward the east, toward the mountains.

Perhaps he, too, had had a vision of a better life, at once pleasing and unsettling. He turned back into the gloom of his restaurant.

Emile was a man of simple faith. He believed in his painting, or had done so. He believed that as long as he remained true to his original vision of what good painting should be, everything else would fall into place. What "everything else" was, was never exactly made clear: although the center of the vision remained sharp, cloud surrounded it. He was a practical creature and, as the years in Geneva passed, increasingly a creature of habit. He did not know why he had broken off in the middle of a painting, to go for a long, aimless walk. And he was disconcerted when, for the second time that day, he saw the girl who had been driven away in the Lagonda.

The group of artists who lived on the second floor of his building, below Emile's garret room, were throwing another party. They painted mainly in the style of Buffet, which Emile regarded as coarse and demoded. He had little to do with them, though he had been known to drink their cheap Algerian wine with them, to show common cause against all other inhabitants of Geneva.

At sunset that day, Emile climbed the stairs with a bottle of his own cheap wine under his arm. His room would be empty, and he was planning to eat bread and Brie for his supper. Despite his fondness for women, his bed had always been more of a staging post than a port as far as the female kind was concerned. As his youth faded, the women became fewer, not to mention (perhaps it was a symptom of a less sympathetic age) more given to complaint. So his bed as well as his room was at present unoccupied. Except for Lisbet, waiting for her bus.

He discovered the Restaurant Boccaccio girl on the landing of the second floor, where the staircase turned and there was a smell of urine. She was being sick in an amateur way out the window, onto the traffic whisking round the corner of the Rue de la Grâce. She appeared helpless and dejected, and her golden hair was bedraggled.

"Please help me," she said, flopping against the sill. "Water...aspirin...."

Such was her state that he had to carry her up to the rough bed in the

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garret. So he found himself looking down into the tear- and vomit-stained face of the lady he had seen that morning driving off in the Lagonda. The softness and warmth of her body was yielding in his arms.

Her helplessness was in evidence again the following morning, when she sat up in bed clutching her small breasts, demanding to know where she was.

She gazed at Emile with large brown eyes, and he was lost. So were Alema's contact lenses, presumably voided into the Rue de la Grâce along with the contents of her stomach.

She demanded cocaine. Emile had none, and scorned it. Secretly, he feared the habit. He had a sinus problem, he explained — already he was explaining: he did not want to aggravate the problem with coke. Alema scarcely had an addiction. Her withdrawal period was not too agonizing, and he saw her through it, keeping her to a diet of wine, mineral water, lettuce, bread, and Brie.

Alema had arrived in Geneva from Paris only the day before the Lagonda episode. She had been three years in Paris, at university, and did not know Geneva at all. Her father lived somewhere here. She had had every intention of going to his place, when she had met some amusing people instead. . . . They had proved far from amusing. They had, she said, "given me a bad time."

Her story was inconsequential and told in a confused way. She did not like to be questioned. Nor was Emile particularly keen to question her. Alema was like a private miracle. One did not question miracles.

"Suppose I said I saw you before we met. . . . Suppose I saw you coming out of a restaurant with three other people, and a fellow in a white suit had hold of your arm?"

"What about it?"

"I was just wondering who the fellow was."

"I know so many people."

"You must remember him. A very fancy dresser. It looked as if he owned a Lagonda."

"I never know the makes of cars. What does it matter, anyway?"

He found it did matter, but he said nothing more.

After some days, Alema rose from the improvised bed and began to potter about the garret. Once or twice, Emile was forced to go out to get some provisions. He returned hastily, fearful in case the girl had disappeared, but Alema was still there.

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She had turned some of his stacked canvases around and looked at them.

"Is this all you do?"

"It's what I do."

"Don't you get bored, doing the same thing over and over?" she asked with a tone of genuine curiosity.

"If you don't appreciate abstract art, it's useless to discuss it with you."

"Oh? Why?"

"For a start, every one of these canvases is different, could never be duplicated or imitated."

"Is anyone trying to imitate them?"

When he had sulked and refused to talk to her for an hour, she said in a mollifying tone, "Anyhow, your canvases don't scare me — not like this clay woman." She indicated Lisbet. "She doesn't approve of me at all. I swear that some nights she comes and stands over me."

"It's the effect of the filthy drugs you've been taking."

She sighed and regarded him reproachfully. The expression made her maddeningly pretty.

Cadmium red and raw umber were not Alema's colors. Her color was gold, a little bright gold more suited to the chic of the Vieille Ville than the shabby artist's colony. Her skin was almost the same dusky gold as her long, curly hair. Even her nutmeg-colored nipples carried a hint of gold. He was intrigued by the way her whole body was covered in a very short gold hair, almost like a thin pelt. It excited him into making love to her with mad frequency; she never showed herself unwilling, although she concealed any enthusiasm she might have felt. Out of respect, he turned Lisbet's face to the wall.

He began feverishly to paint Alema, head-and-shoulders, naked, full-length, standing, lying.

In profile, at least, she could be considered beautiful. There was a quality, a contradiction, between the soft curve of her cheeks and the sternness of her short nose that excited him. Emile prized her; sometimes he trembled so much he could hardly hold his brush. He feared that she would become tired of the garret and remove herself smartly from his life; yet she gave no sign, and did not even venture downstairs to see the Buffet gang below. So he painted in a kind of frenzy, somewhere between hope and desperation — painting her, of course, as Tanguy would have painted her had he been Jackson Pollock.

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Alema was positively childish in her attitude to art. She had heard of no twentieth-century artist but Picasso. She giggled shortsightedly at his finished canvases.

"You know I don't look like that," she said. "Why do you always paint worms?"

While he loftily explained his theory of art to her, he was secretly relieved that she knew so little about the subject. He never forgot that this was a rich, spoiled girl, capable of aberrant and power-based behavior, a potential exploiter of the poor. So he kept her to himself and did not introduce her to any friends.

Occasionally she would interrupt his monologues with a totally irrelevant remark. "Why don't you move to California?" she asked once.

Emile was amazed at the typical rich-bitch question, and said so.

"Didn't you tell me your beloved Tanguy went there?" she said. "It's a fun place. I've been there. You should try it. You might like it."

One golden autumn day, when those inhabitants of Geneva who were not teetotalers were beginning to anticipate the consumption of gallons of the new wine harvest, Emile walked round his studio walls and found that he had amassed twenty fair-sized canvases based on Alema's golden face and golden anatomy. He had painted no tourists for several weeks; now it was too late; the tourists had gone, and he had no money left. Not a sou. Nor had Alema ever appeared to possess a single sou — a typical trick of the very wealthy, Emile thought.

How was he to keep her now? He could not believe that he was in love with this beautiful visitant, but he did wish to possess her, as the Lagonda-owning snob in the white panama had seemed to possess her.

In his twenty canvases lay the solution. He had a collection large enough to interest the hard-eyed, well-shaven gentlemen in the art galleries of the Boulevard Georges Ruiz-Brandt.

Hastily, he varnished the canvases and numbered them ALEMA ONE to ALEMA TWENTY. His hands began to shake again. He was sure he had twenty masterpieces.

While waiting to make sure that the coast was clear and none of his cronies were watching, Emile took Alema and four of the finished canvases down into the mercenary city. This was the first time they had been out together; she had made no attempt to get in touch with her father. As they waited for the break in the traffic that would allow them to cross the

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road, Alema talked gaily of what she would spend the money on when the galleries paid up. She wanted a light-blue line suit, such as she had seen on a Swedish woman in Paris, with a sapphire ring to match, and a fast motor yacht, on the deck of which the suit could be exhibited.

Emile was frankly horrified.

"What on earth do you want a yacht for?"

"Because my daddy's yacht in Antibes is too big and silly for little me."

They crossed the road. As they walked through the public garden, he dared to ask about Daddy, though hatred burned in him as he pronounced the decadent word.

Alema explained that her father was well accustomed to spending money wisely, and would certainly advise on how they could pick up the best and most modern yacht for a reasonable price. Her family was Coptic, with some German blood. One branch of the family still lived in Alexandria: great-uncles and suchlike. Mummy had been part Jewish, of Hungarian origin. She had run off with a minor English lord shortly after Alema's fourth birthday; Mummy and His Lordship had last been seen in South America, heading for the Mato Grosso. He was some kind of an explorer, Alema believed. Daddy, a skilled entrepreneur, had made a mountain of money from armaments, in partnership with a South African millionaire during the reign of the Shah of Iran. It was his second fortune — he had gambled away the first. When the Shah went into exile, trade had become difficult, and Daddy had moved to Geneva, where he had made a third fortune — she didn't quite know how. She thought Iraq had something to do with it. She said a merchant bank was involved.

Although Alema revolted against the ostentation that went with this wealth, she still received an allowance when she bothered to collect it. Unfortunately, she had lost her shoulder bag with all her documents.

She professed a great love of Daddy. He was just a honey bun, really.

Much of this information, apparently brought on by the fresh autumn air, was anathema to the artist in Emile. Such key words as "Shah of Iran," "armaments," and "South Africa" offended his basic principles. Daddy sounded to him like a crook of the worst order — a wealthy crook, accepted in society. His daughter's amoral recital made the whole matter even more shocking. Emile's own father had been a baker of Calvinist faith who had ended up committing suicide to escape his debts.

He put all his misgivings aside as he took Alema's golden arm and led

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her toward the Boulevard Georges Ruiz-Brandt.

Once confronted by the hard facades of the boulevard, however, his nerve failed. The thought of those hard commercial men — all thieves —looking his canvases over made him tremble.

"We'll sit on this bench a moment," he said.

Alema was as obedient as ever, but, as she seated her neat golden behind, tight in its jeans, on the bench beside him, she asked, "Are you tired? You never go out."

"Perhaps you'd better take the paintings into the galleries."

"Why?"

On principle, he never liked to reveal his complex thought processes to women. All he said was, "Study the effects of light on the roofs of these buildings."

But he suddenly clutched Alema's hand, realizing sickly that she meant a great deal despite her poisonous upbringing. He remembered how good he had been to her, never hitting her, always making love to her, always pretending to listen to her prattle, never mocking her for her silly views on art. He was, too, approaching forty years old. Sitting there in the sun, clutching his canvases, with her beside him smiling her sweet, meaningless smile, he realized that he had long grown sick of the garret in the Rue de la Grâce.

Once this was admitted, much followed. If he had grown tired of the old garret — from which his friend Gaston had so long departed — then, by the same token, he longed to be rich, and to have a shower and a toilet of his own. Worse, he longed never to paint again in the style of Tanguy and Pollock. He hated Tanguy. He hated dribbling oil out of old cat food cans. In fact, he never wanted to paint again at all. What had it all brought him? Nothing.

"Watch how the shadows move," he said. "Faster in autumn."

All this while, he sat looking at the cars cruising along the road and the smart shops opposite the gardens, and the tall, cumbersome gray buildings in which there was not one shred of beauty or mercy. And the girl sat beside him, smiling, her hands clasped between her jean-clad knees, indifferently ready for whatever might happen next.

He saw it was absolutely imperative that he have an exhibition in one of those flashy art galleries patronized by millionaires like Alema's daddy. He had had enough of integrity. Integrity was killing him. He was dying

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from lack of recognition. What he needed was financial success.

With success, he might be able to hang on to Alema. Perhaps a yacht was not such a bad idea after all — it might be the cheapest way of cruising the Mediterranean. Just for a year or so.

"I don't mind doing that," she said. "It would be fun."

Emile looked at her blankly. "What? The cruise?"

"Carting your paintings into galleries, silly. It would be fun."

There was no aura of failure about her. She would be more likely to catch the galleries' attention. Her silly talk would not matter; her prettiness would ensure that at least the canvases were viewed.

He was unable to speak. Little did Alema understand the crisis. Success or total failure lay just ahead. Now was the moment — or it was the garret forever. The great stony world of roads and buildings seemed to revolve about him. He hid his eyes and groaned. She took his arm and led him forward. Scarcely heeding, he went with her, the four canvases tucked under his left arm.

"Look, Emile!" Alema was calling in delight. She ran from him, clapping her hands. He realized they had reached the Place XVIII Août, from which branched the Boulevard Georges Ruiz-Brandt. It was a neat little area fringed by small cafes, filled with pruned catalpas, a fountain, and a Metro-System entrance.

The golden girl stood to one side of the Metro entrance, her arm linked with the arm of a woman in a hat peering into her handbag, as if looking for the price of a Metro ticket.

"Isn't she cute?" Alema called, laughing. "She's my friend. It's Lisbet's sister — The nice sister!"

Emile could give no reply. The woman with the handbag was a life-size bronze, completely detailed down to the watch on her wrist — a triumph of realism. Here and there, her green edges shone gold, where passersby had patted her affectionately.

As Alema walked round the figure, laughing and admiring, talking to it, Emile stood where he was, allowing rage to mount within him. An impulse came to him to attack her, but she, all unknowing, played with the bronze woman, addressing it as if it were alive, offering to lend it money for the Metro. Unaware of Emile's anxieties.

She turned to him, her face alight with happiness. "Oh what a wonderful idea, Emile! She's so much less spooky than your Lisbet. It's a really

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cute idea — models of real people in the street. You could do something like this, Emile — something that ordinary people would enjoy. You'd make your fortune."

Spitting rage, he came forward and pointed to the signature inset at pavement level by the feet of the bronze woman.

"This is another of Gaston Bouyat's, can't you see? The municipality has stuck these horrors all over town."

"You could copy Gaston," she said innocently. "Perhaps you could do a whole series of women in bikinis, as if they were just off for a swim. Everyone would like that, and I could be your model. We could have them dotted round the city."

"Go away," he shouted. "Go away, you little idiot! Do you really think I'd pander to the public like that? Do you think I'm another Gaston? Is that what you believe? I am a real artist; I have integrity — but you know nothing about things like that, do you, you rich little whore? Integrity means nothing to you."

Still half-laughing, not at all disconcerted, she said, "But you don't sell any of your paintings, Emile, do you? Be honest."

"Neither did van Gogh!" he shouted. "Typical of you — you judge everything by commercial standards. This silly woman is just a trendy, decadent piece of exploitation! Merely cute — an insult to taste."

"Not if people like it, Emile." She did a skipping step, trying to deflect his anger.

He dropped the canvases so as to be able to wave his arms about.

"People. People. You keep talking about people — when have they had any judgment where real art is concerned? You know nothing about it; you're just a spoiled little rich girl."

She pouted. "But I've been as poor as you, Emile. I've put up with all your crap. Why can't you respect me?"

"Oh, I'm just another adventure to you; you needn't tell me." All his spite and misery flooded to the surface, and he started to rave at her. Other people stopped to watch and listen, their gazes downcast so as not to meet Emile's eyes. Some had a half-smile on their faces, as if to say, "What can you expect from a mad artist?" Only the bronze woman went on industriously looking in her handbag, as if searching for a treasure she had lost.

"Get away from me! I bet you're longing to," Emile finally shouted.

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"Why not go and shack up with Gaston — he's crazy about money, just like you. His penthouse is up in the Vieille Ville. Go on, clear off, you little tart. You mean nothing to me."

"That's not true, Emile. You'll find out."

"I've found out. I've seen through you at last."

She stamped her foot, tears in her eyes. "To hell with you, then — and Tanguy, too. If you feel like that, I'm off. Sell your own lousy paintings."

And she turned on her heel and walked away, threading her course through the fast-moving traffic that formed a whirlpool round the green island in the middle of the Place XVIII Août. As soon as Emile saw that determined walk, his anger left him.

"Wait!" he called. "Alema! I didn't mean it! I hate Tanguy, too."

But an extraordinary thing happened. A white Lagonda that had twice circled the Place pulled in to the curb on the far side of the thoroughfare. A young man in a white panama jumped out of the driver's seat and waved in peremptory fashion to Alema.

She waved back.

Emile watched as her dainty figure negotiated the last lane of traffic and reached the waiting car. The man in the panama removed his hat with a courteous gesture, put an arm around her, and kissed her. She climbed into the front seat. He jumped into the seat beside her. The Lagonda moved forward carelessly, causing cars behind to slam on their brakes and toot in fury. Emile followed the vehicle with his eyes until it merged with the traffic and disappeared in the direction of Salève. Alema never once looked back.

He stood for a while, racked by great sobs. Then he picked up the four portraits of Alema and made his way toward the prosperous galleries in the Boulevard Georges Ruiz-Brandt.

When three galleries had greeted him with frozen politeness, surveyed his canvases in silence, and shown him to the door with a politeness even icier, Emile almost gave up.

One more gallery. The manager of the fourth gallery was more forthcoming. He surveyed the canvases before uttering one word. "Kitsch!"

Emile gave up. His spirit failed him.

How was it that, when he had such contempt for these people, their contempt could so wound him?

Shaking with rage at the world and hatred for himself, he made his way

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back to where he belonged, the dilapidated part of town. At the bottom of the Rue de la Grâce stood a small bistro, always known as the Artists' Tavern. It was said that the great Gubenstrade had himself been drunk here many a night, once with Georges Braque. The Artists' Tavern was run by the plump Karl Beiderz, a man of uncertain nationality and catholic tastes. He allowed Emile to barter his four canvases for a bottle of Belgian gin. Emile sat on the curb and drank down the contents of the bottle gulp by gulp.

He was crawling up the stairs to his garret, when he heard a clock in the Vieille Ville strike midnight. He cursed to himself, straightened, and almost fell into his room.

A friend who had been sleeping in one corner of the room had gone, leaving behind only an aroma of urine. Alema of course had gone, leaving behind only the scent of her perfume. The vast room was untenanted —except for Gaston Bouyat's clay figure. Lisbet stood as ever, waiting for a bus in her raincoat, clutching a dainty umbrella, pert nose turned toward the window as she looked down the street.

"I'm still here," she said. "Still waiting for the bus. And we're alone again."

He was not at all astonished. After all, he was in the same predicament, waiting for something that was never coming.

"Oh, we're alone again right enough. . . ."

"Why don't you join me?" she asked. "You can come with me to my place."

The invitation was one he had heard before from real women.

"Where you going?" he managed to ask.

"Out of this place," she said. "I'm sick of this place."

Again she might have been voicing his thoughts.

He crossed the road and stood on the pavement beside her, feeling dumbly that he had made a decision of finality.

She put her heavy arm in his, taking custody of him, saying, "Now I know the bus will be along at any moment."

And sure enough, a great blue bus came roaring up out of the darkest corner of the garret. Its interior was illuminated. Emile saw as he climbed on after the woman that there were no other passengers.

They settled themselves. He realized the seat was cold, the interior of the bus as glacial as a morgue. The automatic door slammed shut.

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"No, no, I don't want to be here!" he cried in sudden alarm. But already the bus was on its way, straight through the bricks of the dilapidated building, over that wall, part cliff, part hewn stone, that had formed the basis of the ancient fortifications of Geneva, over the Boulevard Georges Ruiz-Brandt, over the city, over the river, and into the darkness prevailing over the world, faster and faster.

To a place that no longer had need of any kind of art.

"Hey! Wait a minute, guys! I haven't had my fifteen minutes of celebrity!"

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Robert Reed has written five novels, THE LEESHORE, THE HORMONE JUNGLE, BLACK MILK, DOWN THE BRIGHT WAY, and the most recent, THE REMARKABLES. He is such a regular contributor to F&SF that Locus Magazine *recently called him "the quintessential F&SF writer." "Coffins" is quintessential Reed: excellent, intriguing and thoughtful.*

Coffins

By Robert Reed

HE SITS BEFORE a projected clerk, confessing his fears.

"You can't assure my safety. I know this. You can't tell me that my ship won't strike a comet or explode on its own. There's an attrition rate with star travel, isn't there? It's got its inherent dangers, and no technology can absolutely guarantee my survival. Am I right?"

The clerk, sculpted from light and designed to nourish confidence, offers an easy smile while nodding. "Your heart," it offers, "is a chaotic organ, sir. There's a measurable statistical chance of complete failure sometime during an average thousand-year life span. A tiny chance, but quite real."

"I know, I know." The man leans back and sighs. "Life itself is

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dangerous. You don't have to remind me."

"Starships are the safest mode of travel in existence."

Sure, on a per-kilometer basis. But that's a ridiculous statistic, the man shutting his eyes and shuddering.

"You say you're being transferred? That your employer wants you to establish a division on New Mars?"

Eyes open. "The chance of a lifetime."

"No doubt," says the enthusiastic clerk.

"It's just. . . . I don't know. . . . I keep seeing myself being killed. I don't daydream as a rule — I test pretty low on creativity scales — but this daydream seems so real. There's some terrible, sudden disaster, then I die."

And the clerk, speaking with authority, tells him, "Travelers have those kinds of premonitions, sir. Studies show. A human being isn't on a true journey unless he feels some impending doom."

The man says nothing.

"Sir?"

"What's the attrition rate among starships?"

"Vanishingly small," the clerk declares. "Hardly worth mentioning, I dare say."

"And now you climb inside," says the robot, one of nine arms pressing at him from behind. "Go on now. The mold's ready and waiting."

He looks downward. The mold is made from a shiny pseudosolid, and it's human-shaped but oversized. Surrounding it and him are a variety of clean machines, humming as if impatient. Kneeling, he places one hand on the mold's wall, finding it cool and slick. An odd stink lingers in his nose and throat. He coughs and looks upward, seeing the mold's cap dropping. The robot tells him to lie on his back, please, and please remain still. The pouring will follow his sizing, the process completely safe . . . and with that the voice fades away, closed out. As promised, the walls flow and close on him. He feels himself being lifted and centered, held motionless by invisible hands. Clucking his tongue, he measures the distance around his face. Beside the faintest glow, there is no illumination. It's like an old-fashioned coffin, he thinks; then the robot's voice comes from everywhere at once.

"Your lifesuit's constructed from hyperfibers coated with a modern flux-field." A kind of pride lies in the words. "In effect, you'll be inside a

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miniature starship. You'll have your own fusion reactor, plus a sophisticated recyke system — the best of everything — and you'll be entirely self-sustaining. Sir. The lifesuit's computer includes a universal library. You can enjoy any book or song or any visual entertainment while you're awake. I presume you've supplied us with personal digitals and other memorabilia —"

"Sure."

"— and at this time, if you would, please express your preference. Do you wish to travel to New Mars awake or asleep?"

"Asleep," he blurts.

"Slumber-sleep, or cold-sleep?"

"Cold."

A pause. "You'll have to be awakened occasionally, as I'm sure you know. Your body will have to purge itself of radiation damage and molecular creeping. Your lifesuit's computer will use its complete autodoc capacities to ensure your health." Another pause. "The average is one week awake for every ten years of cold-sleep."

"I know."

"Are you comfortable, sir?"

The voice has changed without warning. It isn't the robot's or the clerk's. He listens to it repeating the questions, then he says, "I'm fine. Fine."

"I'm your lifesuit's computer sir. I'm very, very pleased to be serving you."

He thinks of the future, long and uncertain.

"How soon would you like to be placed into cold-sleep, sir?"

"Right away," he replies.

"But the pouring isn't complete. It should be another full hour, then a second hour of systems trials. All very standard, I assure you."

"Can I watch a movie? While I wait?"

A pause, brief and vaguely disappointed. "Your faceplate is not yet grown, sir. I'm sorry."

Now it's totally dark inside the mold, claustrophobic and becoming more so by the moment. Lifesuits have nicknames, he recalls. Bodyhouses, for one. More commonly: *Coffins.*

"What can you do for me?" he inquires.

"Name a kind of music, sir."

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"Something nice."

"Can you be more specific?"

"It doesn't matter. Just something happy. Use your discretion. I just want a happy tune, please."

His head is flooded with noise, light and flowing. A delight, and later he asks about it.

"An Io funeral dance," the computer confesses.

"What?!"

This pause seems embarrassed, then it admits, "I thought you'd see the humor, sir. My apologies. My mistake."

The starship is an armored bullet filled with lifesuits — with coffins —accelerating out of the solar system with its giant engines working flawlessly, month after month, every onboard system correcting and repairing itself as needed. The local Oort cloud has been mapped, its most dangerous places avoided. There are a few chunks of debris that slip past the ship's flux-field, but nothing serious. No permanent damage. Starships are most at risk between suns, streaking along at a substantial fraction of light-speed, snowballs capable of etching craters in their armored hulls and larger hazards always lurking in the cold darkness.

The man sleeps at a few degrees above absolute zero, gladly unaware.

Ten years into the voyage he's awakened, and for a week his lifesuit entertains and coddles him. If the ship had room he could rise and move about, but there are no hallways or cabins. He is cargo like everyone else, safely set in a framework of carbon spiderwebs. The most he can manage is to turn his head, asking for his faceplate to turn transparent and him watching the other cargo. Most are in cold-sleep; the ten-year schedule is just an approximate. But a few people are awake, and would he like to speak with them? asks the computer.

"Not really," he says.

Silence.

"I mean, why?" he asks. "Most of these people aren't going to New Mars. They'll disembark first and be gone. Right? So why should I waste the breath?"

"It's your decision," says the computer.

"It is," he agrees.

"Is there anything else I can offer?"

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Yes, but he's embarrassed to ask. This is the first week for him, and it's not as if he's never gone without sexual relations before. These coffins are supposed to have tricks. Devices. But instead he says, "Let me read something, will you?"

"Something already begun?"

He stares at the inert coffins suspended around him. Each has a huge pack fused to its shoulders and back, its mirrored finish bright. Almost liquid. Independent of the ship's power, each one is like a tiny world onto itself.

"Sir? What do you want to read?"

"That one. The one about New Mars that I started. . . ."

And now he's alone with his book unrolling before his eyes, the computer tracking his progress and him barely following the narrative. New Mars refuses to be a real place in his mind. He tries and tries, but it's as if he knows something. As if there's no point in even daydreaming about the faraway place.

FIFTY-NINE years into the voyage — five weeks by his count —the starship suffers a glancing blow with an unmapped comet. No combination of armor and flux-fields can withstand such energies. The hull vaporizes; passengers spill out and oftentimes die. The waking passengers are torn apart by the shock. But cold-sleepers are rigid and mostly safe, provided they can clear the wreckage, approximating the ship's vector. And all the while the lifesuit computers wait, weighing damage and other factors, judging when it would be best to wake up their people.

By the most gentle means.

"What am I seeing?" the man inquires.

"Stars, aren't they?"

"But why?" Panic causes him to flinch, heavy limbs moving and nothing before him but blue shifted suns. "What's happening?"

"You're healthy, sir. I assure you."

The man listens to the story, panic becoming disbelief. Finally he interrupts, claiming, "This can't be. It's a joke. You're projecting stars on my faceplate, and I'm still on board the ship. That's got to be it. You're just having fun with me, aren't you?"

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"Yes," says the computer. "You've seen through me, all right."

"Show me what's really there. I order you!"

The computer selects an image of lifesuits, as before, tens of thousands of them surrounding him. It makes the man relax, believing in this scene. His scared mind can start considering the prospects of being adrift between suns; and eventually he can ask, "If I'm in space, what are my prospects? Hypothetically speaking."

"They'd be good, sir. Relatively speaking."

"What's possible?"

"Well," says the computer, "you'll certainly pass near the next port of call, and since they'll know about the accident and know your approximate trajectory, there's always a chance of being rescued."

"A chance."

"Almost one in fifty."

For no reason, the man feels a sudden conviction in his own good luck. Of course he'll be that one in fifty. He'll be rescued, and afterward he will point to his premonitions and feel quite smug.

"And if you do slip past," says the reassuring voice, "then I can keep you comfortable and healthy for as long as necessary. My systems have no inherent limitations in time. No simulation has been able to put a cap on their life spans, and since I can harvest hydrogen by extending my flux-field, my reactor needs for nothing —"

"Overall," he asks, "what are my chances? What are the odds that someone somewhere will find me?"

"Judging by what I know," it answers, "perhaps one chance in twenty. Or even one in fifteen."

The man shuts his eyes, then says, "Show me those stars again, will you?"

The computer complies.

Blueshifted suns are gathered before him. He's moving face-first at an astonishing speed.

"And this is real?" he whispers.

"Yes. Yes, it is."

Can you keep me in cold-sleep? The rest of the way?"

"If you prefer. Is that what you want?"

"Wake me when you have to. And when we're close to the next destination, if you would."

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"Naturally."

He feels the air around his face growing colder, his breath becoming a white vapor. "And thank you," he offers. "I mean it. You've been very helpful all around."

"Thank you, sir."

"You're a good friend."

"Good night, sir."

"And good luck," he mutters. Then louder: "To both of us."

There is no rescue. An orange sun brightens, then fades, the computer broadcasting the strongest distress signal it can muster. But thousands of other scattered survivors are doing the same, muddying the skies and the local rescue teams overmatched. One in forty-eight are retrieved, and later missions from more-distant suns are able to snag a few more. But none of this known to the man or computer. From their perspective there's nothing but stars and the cold emptiness. Sometimes bits of grit come close, but the flux-field is able to surge and drive them aside. The lifesuit's design proves itself time and again. The man asks why the starship wasn't as adept at avoiding collisions, and the computer explains, "We're a smaller target, in part. And the ship was thoroughly unlucky too."

A smaller target, yes. Maybe it would be smarter, and safer, to shoot people from sun to sun with nothing on but their lifesuits. No fancy starships begging to be struck, he argues.

"A good point, sir. You're possibly right."

But he thinks again. "Except who'd travel that way? Nothing but you and your fancy coffin. . . . I know I wouldn't have ever, ever risked such a journey."

"Besides," the computer interjects, "there'd have to be some means to accelerate you, plus a system to catch you at your destination."

He's barely listening. That word *coffin* is making him shudder.

The computer waits, then says, "Sir? I've been watching, and I think you'll need to be awake more often. I'm sorry, but without the ship's hull you're experiencing more radiation. Your body has to have its chances to heal itself."

A thousand-year life span, and suddenly that seems like a brief time. "Awake how often? And for how long?"

"Every five years, perhaps, and for a full month at a time."

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"You can see cellular damage?"

"And I'm using my autodoc powers to help you." The same miniature synthesizers that create his food can produce almost any complex molecule. Medicines and antioxidants are injected through hair-thin needles. "But I can't work when you're a block of ice."

A pause, then he has to ask, "What are my chances now? I mean for being found, based on everything you know —"

"One in four thousand."

He cannot speak.

"Unfortunately," the computer explains, "we've been moving through an underpopulated region, and since we're traveling somewhat perpendicular to the galactic plane —"

"I understand."

"Yet," says the calm voice, "my estimates are just that. As time passes, new advances in propulsion and long-range sensors might make our discovery inevitable. There's no good way to be certain about anything."

A tightness builds in his throat, in his chest. He makes fists of his clumsy gloved hands, and for a long while he strikes his own chest, leaving himself panting but otherwise unaffected.

"I want to die," he moans.

"You will," his companion promises.

"But you won't help me, will you?"

Silence.

"Will you?"

"First of all," it confesses, "my programming makes that impossible. And secondly, I frankly don't believe you. Sir."

Cold-sleep, then awake.

Cold-sleep.

Awake.

The routine is established quickly, and eventually it feels as if his entire life has been spent inside this coffin. The computer calculates his age on the basis of waking hours, and they celebrate his birthdays and every holiday with as much fanfare as possible. Special foods; strong wines; fantasy women. At some vague point he discovers himself to be comfortable with everything. He actually wakes from both kinds of sleep feeling ready, even eager, always some book to be read or some digital

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entertainment to be enjoyed. Two hundred years old, then three hundred. Then four hundred, and he gives up wondering how his life would have gone on New Mars. It would have been ordinary, no doubt. Colorless. Even silly. But here he's strolling through the galaxy, preparing to leave it altogether . . . and how many people can make that claim?

Here he's been challenged in a grand fashion, and he's adapted as well as anyone could ever adapt.

How can he feel anything but pride?

He reaches his five hundredth birthday, biologically speaking.

Then the seven hundredth.

Then the ninth.

The lifesuit can be turned slowly, the computer adjusting the flux-field to interact with the local magnetic fields. Sometimes the man sees the redshifted faces of the Milky Way behind him. All pretense of a rescue is finished. There is no place for regrets, his life lonely but otherwise rich. Probably no one else has digested as much of a universal library as he has managed, and now he thinks calmly, in organized ways, weighing options with the computer. Centuries of preparation give him ideas and a general outline; the computer absorbs his broad instructions. And as the work progresses, the man finds himself more and more excited about the prospects.

The scheme is amazing, and in its fashion, quite lovely.

"Not bad for a bland little businessman," he declares, laughing and laughing. "Don't you think so?"

"I look forward to beginning the work," the computer jokes.

And the man laughs still harder.

A little short of his thousandth birthday, he dies. And the griefless computer watches the peaceful failure of organs and the ancient brain. It's done its primary job as well as possible; it contemplates the silence within and without. But life persists even now. Bacteria begin to feed on the corpse, harvesting its latent energies. Dozens of species thrive, and the computer consciously helps them with warmth and oxygen. Dead tissues become a living goo. The entire body is eradicated, bones dissolving and then the hard white teeth. The goo is fed sugars and amino acids made by the recyke systems. The computer uses its autodoc needles to ensure fair

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shares to everyone. And it learns as it works, discovering which species prefer which treats, then moving on with the man's strange, patient plan.

THE LIFESUIT races away from the galaxy. The darkness around it is mostly empty, save the hydrogen used for fuel. As promised, the machinery seems impervious to time and to wear. Radiation begets mutations in the passengers; the computer picks and chooses. They're wondrous creatures, these passengers. They're tough and vigorous and almost infinitely flexible, and their best qualities can be married into an organized whole. In effect, a symbiotic mass of bacterial cultures.

One species serves as a nervous system; another is muscle; a third mimics bone; and a fourth is an efficient blood.

The culture fills the lifesuit, built along the dead man's shape. It's not a single organism. Not after even 10 million years is it anything more, or less, than a compilation of tightly orchestrated creatures. Yet it functions much like any multicellular creature. There are recognizable hearts and kidneys. Functional eyes appear after eons of false starts and ugly failures. Every success is nourished by the watchful computer. And when the broad work is completed, it feeds the compilation as it would any man: Rich foods are ingested by a greedy mouthlike affair, then digested, and the fragrant shit is collected from the ass and reprocessed in an endless cycle.

The lifesuit is a biosphere onto itself, enclosed and perpetual.

Ten million years of travel, then more. A busy, busy span of time, and there's still so much work to be done.

—

The complilation becomes sentient gradually, in stages. It grows up watching fixed pinwheels of stars, discovering a voice — deep and strong — and then a second voice. Its own voice. It learns how to read and sing, how to reason and do mathematics. Not quite as quick or coordinated as a human being, it nonetheless has its advantages. It's much more durable. It rejuvenates itself without end. Its mind isn't subject to depressions or failures of will. And since it's married so effectively to the lifesuit, it can't imagine any other existence for itself.

There is a sense of humor, white pseudoteeth showing when it smiles.

It picks its own name, saying, "Multitude," with a voice not unlike the

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dead man's. "I am Multitude."

"Hello, Multitude. How do you feel today?"

"Fine. What's to happen?"

"Like always, we'll continue with your education. Then when your brain species tire, you'll sleep and recharge, digesting the day's lessons."

"What about later?"

"Later?" echoes the computer. "What do you mean?"

"That splotch of light is getting bigger, isn't it? That means it's closer, doesn't it?"

A spiral galaxy lies in their path, yes. The computer explains that they'll pass through it. Or not. "There's a heightened chance of an impact while we're inside it," it warns. "But we've lost a good deal of our initial velocity. Every time I grab a local hydrogen atom, we're slowed a little bit. So we probably won't hit hard enough to shatter."

"Good."

A long pause, then it adds, "If we miss, it's only temporary. We don't have enough velocity to escape that galaxy's pull, and we'll stop and fall back through again. Over and over again, and we'll eventually hit some obstruction."

"Which means?"

"Possibilities. There are always possibilities."

Multitude is content with the open-ended answer. What's the hurry? "So tell me more about this man. What kind of organism was it? That's what I want to learn about today."

"Gladly," says the computer. "Of course."

Multitude watches the yellow sun on its right, and the computer speaks about the coming impact and how it has changed their vector just enough, wrestling with the magnetic fields. A blue planet lies straight ahead, peaceful and apparently new; and once again the computer explains, "In one sense you'll die. The gee forces will shatter you. But your individual cells will survive, and their spores, and I promise that the next Multitude will be as close to you as I can manage."

Multitude says nothing.

"Do you have any questions?"

A laugh, and it says, "None you can answer fast enough —"

* * *

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The coffin is a meteorite, small but faster than most; and the flux-field surges at the last instant, softening the impact, bleeding heat into the surrounding seawater and the muddy seafloor.

The computer finds minor damage and initiates repairs.

Multitude is reborn and reeducated.

Once strong enough, it rises to its feet and walks. There are no fishes or shelled creatures. The only life on this world are various colored scums in the shallowest waters. Multitude leaves deep footprints in the shoreline muds. It stops on the shoreline, eats and sleeps, then heads inland with the first light, barren gray country beneath a blue-and-white sky.

Simple tools yield to more-sophisticated ones.

Multitude and the computer use the ancient library, mastering hundreds of technologies. The first fusion reactor works after a mere eleven millennia of intricate fiddling. It's an imperfect but effective mirror of Multitude's reactor, as are the hyperfiber shell and the other proven systems. Multitude and computer replicate themselves once, then again. Then a thousand times. They use native bacteria to fill the new lifesuits, each onboard computer taking charge, twisting biology to serve the great plan.

A factory rises on the barren ground. Humming machinery and molds work night and day, producing new citizens by the thousands.

Launchpads shake, mighty rockets driving skyward.

Most are bound for nearby suns, but a few have a more distant and personal goal — capsules bursting open in deep space, shiny figures like dust en route to the ancestor's homeland.

Multitude and the computer are eventually destroyed in an industrial accident, an experimental plasma drill all but evaporating both of them. And the others, following strict instructions, take what remains to the sea and let the tides take them away. Human faces weep. Human voices sing a light, almost happy song from some vanished world called Io. Then it's back to work, to life, much to be done and the possibilities without number.

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SCIENCE

BRUCE STERLING

ARTIFICIAL LIFE

THE NEW scientific field of study called "Artificial Life" can be defined as "the attempt to abstract the logical form of life from its material manifestation."

So far, so good. But what is life?

The basic thesis of "Artificial Life" is that "life" is best understood as a complex systematic process. "Life" consists of relationships and rules and interactions. "Life" as a property is potentially separate from actual living creatures.

Living creatures (as we know them today, that is) are basically made of wet organic substances: blood and bone, sap and cellulose, chitin and ichor. A living creature — a kitten, for instance — is a physical object that is made of molecules and occupies space and has mass.

A kitten is indisputably "alive" — but not because it has the "breath of life" or the "vital impulse" somehow lodged inside its body. We may think and talk and act as if the kitten "lives" because it has a mysterious "cat spirit" animating its physical cat flesh. If we were superstitious, we might even imagine that a healthy young cat had *nine* lives. People have talked and acted just this way for millennia.

But from the point-of-view of Artificial Life studies, this is a very halting and primitive way of conceptualizing what's actually going on with a living cat. A kitten's "life" is a *process*, with properties like reproduction, genetic variation, heredity, behavior, learning, the possession of a genetic program, the expression of that program through a physical body. "Life" is a thing that *does*, not a thing that *is* — life extracts energy from the environment, grows, repairs damage, reproduces.

And this network of processes called "Life" can be picked apart, and studied, and mathematically

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modelled, and simulated with computers, and experimented upon — outside of any creature's living body.

"Artificial Life" is a very young field of study. The use of this term dates back only to 1987, when it was used to describe a conference in Los Alamos, New Mexico on "the synthesis and simulation of living systems." Artificial Life as a discipline is saturated by computer-modelling, computer-science, and cybernetics. It's conceptually similar to the earlier field of study called "Artificial Intelligence." Artificial Intelligence hoped to extract the basic logical structure of intelligence, to make computers "think." Artificial Life, by contrast, hopes to make computers only about as "smart" as an ant — but as "alive" as a swarming anthill.

Artificial Life as a discipline uses the computer as its primary scientific instrument. Like telescopes and microscopes before them, computers are making previously invisible aspects of the world apparent to the human eye. Computers today are shedding light on the activity of complex systems, on new physical principles such as "emergent behavior," "chaos," and "self-organization."

For millennia, "Life" has been one of the greatest of metaphysical and scientific mysteries, but now a few novel and tentative computerized probes have been stuck into the fog. The results have already proved highly intriguing.

Can a computer robot be alive? Can an entity which only exists as a digital simulation be "alive"? If it looks like a duck, quacks like a duck, waddles like a duck, but it in fact takes the form of pixels on a supercomputer screen — is it a duck? And if it's not a duck, then what on earth is it? What exactly does a thing have to do and be before we say it's "alive"?

It's surprisingly difficult to decide when something is "alive." There's never been a definition of "life," whether scientific, metaphysical, or theological, that has ever really worked. Life is not a clean either/or proposition. Life comes on a kind of scale, apparently, a kind of continuum — maybe even, potentially, *several different kinds of continuum.*

One might take a pragmatic, laundry-list approach to defining life. To be "living," a thing must grow. Move. Reproduce. React to its environment. Take in energy, excrete waste. Nourish itself, die, and decay. Have a genetic code, perhaps, or be the result of a process of evolution But there are grave problems with all of these concepts. All these things can be done today by machines or programs. And the

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concepts themselves are weak and subject to contradition and paradox.

Are viruses "alive"? Viruses can thrive and reproduce, but not by themselves — they have to use a victim cell in order to manufacture copies of themselves. Some dormant viruses can crystallize into a kind of organic slag that's dead for all practical purposes, and can stay that way indefinitely — until the virus gets another chance at infection, and then the virus comes seething back.

How about a frozen human embryo? It can be just as dormant as a dormant virus, and certainly can't survive without a host, but it can become a living human being. Some people who were once frozen embryos may be reading this magazine right now! Is a frozen embryo "alive" — or is it just the *potential* for life, a genetic life-program halted in mid-execution?

Bacteria are simple, as living things go. Most people however would agree that germs are "alive." But there are many other entities in our world today that act in life-like fashion and are easily as complex as germs, and yet we don't call them "alive" — except "metaphorically" (whatever *that* means).

How about a national government, for instance? A government can grow and adapt and evolve. It's certainly a very powerful entity that consumes resources and affects its environment and uses enormous amounts of information. When people say "Long Live France," what do they mean by that? Is the Soviet Union now "dead"?

Amoebas aren't "mortal" and don't age — they just go right on splitting in half indefinitely. Does that mean that all amoebas are actually pieces of one super-amoeba that's three billion years old?

And where's the "life" in an ant-swarm? Most ants in a swarm never reproduce; they're sterile workers — tools, peripherals, hardware. All the individual ants in a nest, even the queen, can die off one by one, but as long as new ants and new queens take their place, the swarm itself can go on "living" for years without a hitch or a stutter.

Questioning "life" in this way may seem so much nit-picking and verbal sophistry. After all, one may think, people can easily tell the difference between something living and dead just by having a good long look at it. And in point of fact, this seems to be the single strongest suit of "Artificial Life." It is very hard to look at a good Artificial Life program in action without perceiving it as, somehow, "alive."

Only living creatures perform the behavior known as "flocking." A gigantic wheeling flock of cranes or flamingos is one of the most

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impressive sights that the living world has to offer.

But the "logical form" of flocking can be abstracted from its "material manifestation" in a flocking group of actual living birds. "Flocking" can be turned into rules implemented on a computer. The rules look like this:

1. Stay with the flock — try to move toward where it seems thickest.
2. Try to move at the same speed as the other local birds.
3. Don't bump into things, especially the ground or other birds.

In 1987, Craig Reynolds, who works for a computer-graphics company called Symbolics, implemented these rules for abstract graphic entities called "bird-oids" or "boids." After a bit of fine-tuning, the result was, and is, uncannily realistic. The darn things *flock*!

They meander around in an unmistakeably lifelike, lively, organic fashion. There's nothing "mechanical" or "programmed-looking" about their actions. They bumble and swarm. The boids in the middle shimmy along contentedly, and the ones on the fringes tag along anxiously jockeying for position, and the whole squadron hangs together, and wheels and swoops and maneuvers, with amazing grace. (Actually they're neither "anxious" nor "contented," but when you see the boids behaving in this lifelike fashion, you can scarcely help but project lifelike motives and intentions onto them.)

You might say that the boids simulate flocking perfectly — but according to the hard-dogma position of A-Life enthusiasts, it's not "simulation" at all. This is real "flocking" pure and simple — this is exactly what birds actually do. Flocking is flocking — it doesn't matter if it's done by a whooping crane or a little computer-sprite.

Clearly the birdoids themselves aren't "alive" — but it can be argued, and is argued, that they're actually doing something that is a genuine piece of the life process. In the words of scientist Christopher Langton, perhaps the premier guru of A-Life: "The most important thing to remember about A-Life is that the part that is artificial is not the life, but the materials. Real things happen. We observe real phenomena. It is real life in an artificial medium."

The great thing about studying flocking with boids, as opposed to say whooping cranes, is that the Artificial Life version can be experimented upon, in controlled and repeatable conditions. Instead of just *observing* flocking, a life-scientist can now *do* flocking. And not just flocks — with a change in the parameters, you can study "school-

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ing" and "herding" as well.

The great hope of Artificial Life studies is that Artificial Life will reveal previously unknown principles that directly govern life itself — the principles that give life its mysterious complexity and power, its seeming ability to defy probability and entropy. Some of these principles, while still tentative, are hotly discussed in the field.

For instance: the principle of *bottom-up* initiative rather than top-down orders. Flocking demonstrates this principle well. Flamingos do not have blueprints. There is no squadron-leader flamingo barking orders to all the other flamingos. Each flamingo makes up its own mind. The extremely complex motion of a flock of flamingos arises naturally from the interactions of hundreds of independent birds. "Flocking" consists of many thousands of simple actions and simple decisions, all repeated again and again, each action and decision affecting the next in sequence, in an endless systematic feedback.

This involves a second A-Life principle: *local* control rather than *global* control. Each flamingo has only a vague notion of the behavior of the flock as a whole. A flamingo simply isn't smart enough to keep track of the entire "big picture," and in fact this isn't even necessary. It's only necessary to avoid bumping the guys right at your wingtips; you can safely ignore the rest.

Another principle: *simple* rules rather than *complex* ones. The complexity of flocking, while real, takes place entirely outside of the flamingo's brain. The individual flamingo has no mental conception of the vast impressive aerial ballet in which it happens to be taking part. The flamingo makes only simple decisions; it is never required to make complex decisions requiring a lot of memory or planning. *Simple* rules allow creatures as downright stupid as fish to get on with the job at hand — not only successfully, but swiftly and gracefully.

And then there is the most important A-Life principle, also perhaps the foggiest and most scientifically controversial: *emergent* rather than *prespecified* behavior. Flamingos fly from their roosts to their feeding grounds, day after day, year in year out. But they will never fly there exactly the same way twice. They'll get there all right, predictable as gravity; but the actual shape and structure of the flock will be whipped up from scratch every time. Their flying order is not memorized, they don't have numbered places in line, or appointed posts, or maneuver orders. Their orderly behavior simply *emerges*, different each time, in a ceaselessly varying shuffle.

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Ants don't have blueprints either. Ants have become the totem animals of Artificial Life. Ants are so 'smart' that they have vastly complex societies with actual *institutions* like slavery and agriculture and aphid husbandry. But an individual ant is a profoundly stupid creature.

Entomologists estimate that individual ants have only fifteen to forty things that they can actually "do." But if they do these things at the right time, to the right stimulus, and change from doing one thing to another when the proper trigger comes along, then ants as a group can work wonders.

There are anthills all over the world. They all work, but they're all different; no two anthills are identical. That's because they're built bottom-up and emergently. Anthills are built without any spark of planning or intelligence. An ant may feel the vague instinctive need to wall out the sunlight. It begins picking up bits of dirt and laying them down at random. Other ants see the first ant at work and join in; this is the A-Life principle known as "allelomimesis," imitating the others (or rather not so much "imitating" them as falling mechanically into the same instinctive pattern of behavior).

Sooner or later, a few bits of dirt happen to pile up together. Now there's a wall. The ant wall-building sub-program kicks into action. When the wall gets high enough, it's roofed over with dirt and spit. Now there's a tunnel. Do it again and again and again, and the structure can grow seven feet high, and be of such fantastic complexity that to draw it on an architect's table would take years. This emergent structure, "order out of chaos," "something out of nothing" — appears to be one of the basic "secrets of life."

These principles crop up again and again in the practice of life-simulation. Predator-prey interactions. The effects of parasites and viruses. Dynamics of population and evolution. These principles even seem to apply to internal living processes, like plant growth and the way a bug learns to walk. The list of applications for these principles has gone on and on.

It's not hard to understand that many simple creatures, doing simple actions that affect one another, can easily create a really big mess. The thing that's *hard* to understand is that those same, bottom-up, unplanned, "chaotic" actions can and do create living, working, functional order and system and pattern. The process really must be seen to be believed. And computers are the instruments that have made us see it.

Most any computer will do.

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Oxford zoologist Richard Dawkins has created a simple, popular Artificial Life program for personal computers. It's called "The Blind Watchmaker," and demonstrates the inherent power of Darwinian evolution to create elaborate pattern and structure. The program accompanies Dr. Dawkins' 1986 book of the same title (quite an interesting book, by the way), but is available independently.

The Blind Watchmaker program creates patterns from little black-and-white branching sticks, which develop according to very simple rules. The first time you see them, the little branching sticks seem anything but impressive. They look like this:

Fig. 1 Ancestral A-Life Stick-Creature

After a pleasant hour with Blind Watchmaker, I myself produced these very complex forms — what Dawkins calls "Biomorphs."

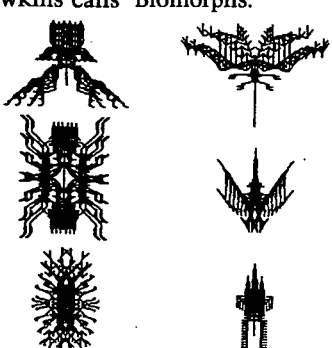

Fig. 2 — Six Dawkins Biomorphs

It's very difficult to look at such biomorphs without interpreting them as critters — *something* alive-ish, anyway. It seems that the human eye is *trained by nature* to interpret the output of such a process as "life-like." That doesn't mean it *is* life, but there's definitely something *going on there.*

What is going on is the subject of much dispute. Is a computer-simulation actually an abstracted part of life? Or is it technological mimicry, or mechanical metaphor, or clever illusion?

We can model thermodynamic equations very well also, but an equation isn't hot, it can't warm us or burn us. A perfect model of heat isn't heat. We know how to model the flow of air on an airplane's wings, but no matter how perfect our simulations are, they don't actually make us fly. A model of motion isn't motion. Maybe "Life" doesn't exist either, without that real-world carbon-and-water incarnation. A-Life people have a term for these carbon-and-water chauvinists. They call them "carbaquists."

Artificial Life maven Rodney Brooks designs insect-like robots at MIT. Using A-Life bottom-up principles — "fast, cheap, and out of control" — he is trying to make small multi-legged robots that can behave as deftly as an ant. He and his busy crew of graduate students

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are having quite a bit of success at it. And Brooks finds the struggle over definitions beside the real point. He envisions a world in which robots as dumb as insects are everywhere; dumb, yes, but agile and successful and pragmatically useful. Brooks says: "If you want to argue if it's living or not, fine. But if it's sitting there existing twenty-four hours a day, three hundred sixty-five days of the year, doing stuff which is tricky to do and doing it well, then I'm going to be happy. And who cares what you call it, right?"

Ontological and epistemological arguments are never easily settled. However, "Artificial Life," whether it fully deserves that term or not, is at least easy to see, and rather easy to get your hands on. "Blind Watchmaker" is the A-Life equivalent of using one's computer as a home microscope and examining pondwater. Best of all, the program costs only twelve bucks! It's cheap and easy to become an amateur A-Life naturalist.

Because of the ubiquity of powerful computers, A-Life is "garage-band science." The technology's out there for almost anyone interested — it's hacker-science. Much of A-Life practice basically consists of picking up computers, pointing them at something promising, and twiddling with the focus knobs until you see something really gnarly. *Figuring out what you've seen* is the tough part, the "real science"; this is where actual science, reproducible, falsifiable, formal, and rigorous, parts company from the intoxicating glamor of the intellectually sexy. But in the meantime, you have the contagious joy and wonder of just *gazing at the unknown*: the primal thrill of discovery and exploration.

A lot has been written already on the subject of Artificial Life. The best and most complete journalistic summary to date is Steven Levy's brand-new book, *Artificial Life: The Quest for a New Creation* (Pantheon Books 1992).

The easiest way for an interested outsider to keep up with this fast-breaking field is to order books, videos, and software from an invaluable catalog: "Computers In Science and Art," from Media Magic. Here you can find the Proceedings of the first and second Artificial Life Conferences, where the field's most influential papers, discussions, speculations and manifestos have seen print.

But learned papers are only part of the A-Life experience. If you can see Artificial Life actually demonstrated, you should seize the opportunity. Computer simulation of such power and sophistication is a truly remarkable historical advent.

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No previous generation had the opportunity to see such a thing, much less ponder its significance. Media Magic offers videos about cellular automata, virtual ants, flocking, and other A-Life constructs, as well as personal software "pocket worlds" like CA Lab, Sim Ant, and Sim Earth. This very striking catalog is available free from Media Magic, P.O. Box 507, Nicasio CA 94946.

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A.R. Morlan has written two novels for Bantam Books, THE AMULET and DARK JOURNEY. Her short fiction has appeared in many publications, including Twilight Zone, Night Cry, Weird Tales, *and* Pulphouse. *"With Cockles and Mussels, Alive, Alive-O" marks her first appearance in F&SF.*

With Cockles and Mussels, Alive, Alive-o

By A. R. Morlan

WE WAS ON the way from Florida to Georgia, from "oranges to peaches, with the 'maters up the road," like Daddy likes to say when he ain't in a bad mood, and he's looking forward to picking the tomatoes up in South Carolina, which I guess is like someone who ain't a picker saying that there *is* that light up yonder in that tunnel — only, Daddy wasn't in no looking-forward kinda mood that night, while he was driving me and Mama and Cherrie down that highway in the dark, 'cause driving in daytime is miserable without no air conditioner in the car.

'Couse, the 'conditioner never did work when the car was new to us — not *new*-new, just new-*bought*-by-Daddy — so's that wasn't what was making Daddy mean. It was Cherrie. *Again.*

Oh, not actually Cherie, on 'count she's his favorite, like I'm Mama's,

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but what Cherrie was singing, over and over in that little bitty voice of hers, real thin and pure and unsteady-sweet, like all little kids Cherrie's age got. Not real loud, least not as loud as the old warbly eight-track in the player on the dashboard — the one that come with the car, both the player and the tape from the little frayed shoe box full of them that was sitting in the footwell on the passenger side up front, 'cause the guy who sold us the car said he was switching over to cassettes — but 'parently Daddy could hear Cherrie anyway, even with his bust eardrum on one side, and that singer in The Doors sorta shouting out that "L.A. Woman" song over and over 'cause the tape deck always plays one of the sides of the tape twice through before clicking on to the next side, blaring in Daddy's good ear.

Since he was driving, Daddy couldn't reach behind him real good to bop Cherrie a good one, so's he yelled above the music, "Shaddup, Cherrie; Daddy don't wanna *hear* it no more," while Mama's just looking out the window as Florida sorta rolled on into Georgia, without it being sight-plain, like when one colored state turns to another color on a map. Only, I don't know if Mama knows how that is on maps, or on a globe. She can't read too good, so I don't think that's what she was thinking on as she was looking out that window whiles Daddy's yelling. But I could see a little reflection of her face, in one of the mirrors mounted outside the open door window, and she didn't look too happy, but she wasn't saying nothing to Daddy about him blowing up at Cherrie. It never worked before, not even when *I* was Cherrie's age, and I used to sing. Can't remember if I ever sang *that* song; I guess it's sorta like forgetting what-all your mouth and tongue and teeth can all do if they're working together to do something other than eat, so your whole lower face can't even entertain the notion of talking if it don't *know* after a long time. And ain't got no way to *remember* it without a brain of its very own.

But . . . yet, the way Cherrie sings the last bit of the song, the way she goes up real high and *pining*, like she's wanting something so real, *real* bad, but ain't never gonna get it no *way* no *how* no *time*, but still wants it all the same — I dunno; it just makes *me* feel like that — which don't make no sense on 'count of it just being this dumb nursery rhyme, something she learned in some picker camp from some other fruit tramp's kid or wife, or somewhere, a fancy-talk song that really don't have nothing to do with us pickers at *all* —

Cherrie just blinked a little when Daddy hollered at her, and hugged

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her plastic block against her chest, digging it into the soft skin 'tween her armpit and chest, and rubbing the block with her tiny fingers, and her mouth shut in this wet little line while the piano player on the tape was doing this tinkly bit, all bouncy; then the singer came back on with his strong, sorta chuffy voice, like he's having a real good time but is sorta winded, too. Sorta like how Daddy and some of the other picker men sound when they're playing cards in front of the campfire, passing the bottles of beer and slapping the cards on the rickety folding table one of them's pulled out of the back of his station wagon, or out of the trunk of his car. Once, I was watching them all play — Mama, too — and they was all happy and joking and card-slapping away, and I was halfway up the side of this big old tree, steadying myself with my bare feet, while the night breeze blowed out my little nightgown behind me, and Daddy looked around at me, shifting on the upside-down herbicide bucket he was using for a stool, and he goes, "Wind's gonna catch you up, blow you far 'way," and everyone round the tables laughs at that 'fore picking up their cards and bottles again — and just by listening to that tape in the machine, the tape that was starting to get warbly and let little bits of sounds from the other sides of the tape leak through somehow, so you'd get the main song plus all little snatches of the rest of the songs, too, listening to that tinkly piano — or maybe it was an organ; sometimes it sounded like one, too —and that singer repeating and repeating "L.A. Womaaaan" in a sorta plaintive, needing-*something* voice — it was like I was back there balancing on the bottom trunk of that big tree, the wind blowing through my nightie, bringing the smell of beer and the beans cooking on the fire into my nose again, and I think I was only four or five then — if it was beans they was picking during the *day* of that night, then I was already five, on 'count of that being the time of year, North Carolina way, where we always are after my birthday during peach time in Georgia — anyway, that's how the music I was hearing made me feel, happy, yet not happy-*now*, but can't-be-this-happy-*again* happy.

Like — and not like — the way Cherrie's song makes me feel inside, like wanting for there to *be* the happy time to remember later on. Like Cherrie *needed* what she's singing about, even if she can't understand half of what she's saying 'cause the words are too big for a three-year-old. *I* don't know how she *remembers* them, let 'lone sings them.

But she does, and did, not too long after the guy on the tape gave up

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singing 'bout (but not *wanting*) his L.A. Womaaaan, and the tape hissed and crackled with bits of almost-song, and before the next song started, Cherrie started up again, real soft, real thin and high and fine:

In London fair city/ Where the girls is so pretty
There lives a fair ma'den/ Named Molly Malone
She walks her wheelbarrow/ Thru streets broad an' narrow
Singin' 'Cockles and Mussels! Alive, Alive-o —

— Only, she don't sing it straight out like it looks written down, but like the words is jumping up and down and real high and heartrending like this:

Sing$^{in'}$ *'Cock* *les and* *Mus* *sels! Alive,* *Alive*$^{-o}$ —

Something like that, anyhow. I can't sing it onto the paper.

But this time, Daddy pulls the tape outta the machine, tosses it into the box with the rest of the tapes close by Mama's feet, and, keeping one hand on the wheel, he leans over and smacks Cherrie on the side of the head, not hard enough to make her head jerk none, but hard enough to muss up her hair so's it's bunched up funny under her duck barrette.

"You *quit* it now, hear? Daddy can't concentrate," he adds, like that's why he done it in the first place — but I know it ain't the reason, on 'count of Mama not getting her dander up when one of her young'uns got hit for doing nothing *real* bad, like kicking on the back of the seats up ahead, or fighting. That's when I knowed Mama was unhappy on 'count of Cherrie's singing, too.

All she done was toss us a thin blanket, the one made up of two baby diapers sewed long side to long side, and say, "Get you girls some sleep," 'fore turning around and rooting in the box of old tapes. She didn't find none she hadn't heard twice through already since leaving the orange grove at sundown, when Daddy collected his pay and Mama finished packing up the car. All's we got to pack is clothes, a few blankets, sheets, some dishes, and Daddy's packs of cards. And Cherrie's blocks, and my notebook and pencil. We'd picked up what was stored under that picnic table we was camping out under, threw it in the trunk, and we was ready to leave once Daddy got his and Mama's money (which was sorta mine, too,

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since I picked almost a third of what they did, but kids my age — eleven —ain't supposed to be working in the fields or the groves, or wherever what it is that we're picking is sprouting or hanging or just sitting waiting to be harvested, so I didn't get none of the money).

I was tired out from picking oranges (and keeping an eye on Cherrie, too), so I tucked the blanket around Cherrie, and then pillowed my head on her hip, and fell asleep, with her little, thin voice going up and up on the "*Cock*$_{les}$" part of the song, over and over, until I 'bout cried myself to sleep with the wanting and not-*having* of it all.

COME MORNING, we was at the peach camp, this time a line of shacks, each a big room with no curtains, no locking doors, and no bathroom (or 'lectricity, or water, or—), with cardboard walls that wasn't too soggy near the bottoms, and some old pictures hung on the exposed joists and struts inside the shack. Pretty good place to stay, considering. 'Least there was a bed in the middle of the room, and a wood-burning stove. Daddy said the rent was "fairly fair," which is 'bout as good as it gets. Sometimes them growers rent us tents with little holes in 'em, or (like what happened to us once in South Carolina when I was six), an old pigsty with cots lined up in it.

Only thing I didn't like none was how the camp was so close to an outlying street in the town nearby, and how town folks' kids sometimes walk past, looking. Always *looking*, like they do no matter where we go or where they happen to be. Only, they won't look at us up *close*. Cross to the other side of the street, or road, or whatever they's walking on that they don't want to share with us any closer than arm's length, sometimes turning their heads just enough that they don't think we can see 'em looking down their noses at us.

Mama and me, we was taking what we owns into the shack, when the first of 'em, one of them town kids, shouts:

"Filthy *pick*ers! Nose-pickers, butt-pickers—"

And I wanted to drop what I was carrying and take off after them, but Mama just shakes her head *no*, and goes, "You knows what Daddy says, Peaches. Only words—"

"*Sick* words," I say back, turning my head to stare and stick my tongue out in them kids' direction, but they was already gone, hiding, laughing at us from behind a screen of trees. Mama just steered Cherrie into the

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shack, and lifted her onto the big bed, then sat down next to her, patting the mattress for me to sit, too. I wouldn't.

"Peaches," Mama started, her tongue working and working around what teeth she's got left up front (all her back ones is *gone*, like all of Daddy's but the two big ones on top) like she was trying to shift 'em all down into a single, full-looking row, and her eyes is watering a little. "You knows better than to start trouble with them—"

"*They* was yelling at *us*, not the other—"

"*Peaches.*" Only, this time not happy at *all*, and Daddy heard her and came in slapping the dirt off his jeans, making little clouds puff off his hips and thighs, going, "What *now*, Mattie?"

"Peaches again. Tauntin' the town kids—"

I bit my lips and crossed my arms and dug my toes into the packed dirt floor, I was so mad. I said — not looking at either of them, but at Cherrie, 'cause she wouldn't understand, and so her face wouldn't pucker up all bitter, like Mama's and Daddy's do — "They was taunting *me*. And Mama, and Cherrie. Call us '*nose*-pickers,' like that's all we got the time to *do* all day, stand around with our fingers up our—"

Daddy looks at Mama, like he's asking, *She right!*, with his eyes —only, Mama makes out like she don't hear by closing her eyes.

"And it was a bunch of them, five-six maybe, 'gainst us. And we wasn't saying *nothing* to them," I kept on, getting all hot in the face and wet under the arms, and more frustrated inside, on 'count of this happening again and again no matter where we go, or whether we're settled for the month or the whole season, and whether we're living in some picker camp (don't never call 'em *migrant*, even to myself), trying to steer clear of the Haitians or the other dark-skinned folk from out of the country who'll work for the *real* cheap, plus drunks and whores who hang around there, or living in something real decent, like a trailer up on blocks or maybe even a room above a tavern or little store, like we sometimes do come cabbage, pear, and cherry time up in New York State (like we was when Cherrie was born) — no matter where we happens to be, or how much we keep to ourselves, and our own picker friends, town folk is always *after* us.

And what burns me is how they sure do like to eat what we broke our backs and butts for out in the field. Even Cherrie helps pick, even though it's maybe a bushel or a box of this or that for the whole day, on 'count we get paid by the bushel or box or whatever they're using to store what we've

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just picked. No matter who picks it in the family. But set foot in the same store that's got what we pickers picked up on the shelves, all fancy and canned or frozen or put in them little packets that's fixed so that you just toss 'em from the cubboard into the microwave do-dad and then onto your plate, and none of them folks wants *anything* to do with them that's done the actual picking. Like the food just leaps off the vine or tree or outta the ground and into a line of open and ready cans or boxes. With no sweaty fingers touching them, getting dirt so deep under the nails you can't get it out no matter how hard you scrub 'em in the river or gas station washroom or wher*ever*, so your hands never look *quite* clean no matter how clean they are, and so's the girl or guy behind the store counter won't let their fingers touch yours, just drop what change you got coming with money that was *worked* for, not state-given like them food-stampers I seen laughing and buying steaks and long plastic trays of shrimp and breaded veal cutlets whose food coupons them checkers take *gladly*, onto the counter, sometimes so hard and so fast the money rolls off the counter and onto the floor, so's you have to bend over and grub for it around people's feet, and all the while you just *know* they're snickering or whatnot above your bent-over bottom.

I could've told all that to Mama and Daddy, but they've been pickers since they was littler than Cherrie or me, and been picking way longer than both of us have lived put together into one age, so's they've heard it all, and seen it all, but yet they just don't unnerstand what it's *like* when them town folks dig at us. Oh, I've heard 'em *say* how they're proud to be what they are, and how they can't live no tied-down life once the itchy foot sets in come spring, but it don't stop 'em from having that hurt in the eye when someone snubs one of 'em. Yet . . . they won't fight back, won't tell them people to their *faces* what they're feeling, like there's just no chance any of 'em will maybe unnerstand that we're people first, then pickers, just like any of them is a banker or a checker or a housewife or a schoolkid or a truck driver or a *something* on *top* of being a person first off. 'Fore they had jobs or titles or anything. Like they got no hope of being unnerstood, like picker talk won't filter into nonpicker ears. Like other folks got them labeled "*Migrant*" or worse and won't let no other thing into their heads when it comes to thinking 'bout people like us.

So . . . I just stood there, looking from Cherrie's face to her patched sundress and back again, like whatever I wanted to say might be hidden

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somewhere on Cherrie herself, and Mama and Daddy can't say nothing I ain't heard already, when Cherrie pipes up with that song, just the last couple of lines, 'cause she don't know what else to do or say, and the silence is getting real thick—

*W' cock*les *an' mus*sels—

Mama looks all jumpy at that, and starts to tickle Cherrie, so's she'll fall backwards onto the saggy bed, and then Daddy starts to play with her, too, like playing is the most important thing in the world, more important than the picking we gotta start doing pretty soon, or getting the shack in some sorta order for the weeks we're gonna be here. Only . . . I see their eyes, 'fore they started playing with Cherrie, and I knowed that it was only 'cause the walls is thin and sound carries pretty fair in the hot stillness that they weren't hitting on her, and yelling, instead.

I LEARNED TO grit my teeth until they felt like there was no more white on them from all the gritting all the time we was picking peaches that summer, 'cause every time the town kids would ride past on their bikes, or walk past on foot, it was the same old chant, "Nose-pickers, butt-pickers, pick me a bunch of—," and I had to swallow hard over and over until my ears felt stuffy so's I couldn't hear what them kids *claimed* we picked. On 'count of Mama and Daddy and Cherrie working right near me, either on the ladder or on the ground, putting the fruit in the baskets real tight so it couldn't bruise too much once it was in the trucks. I wanted to yell back to them kids, "We ain't no worse than you; you don't like what you see, *you* make us look better, or turn your stupid heads" — only, I'd've been bopped outside the head just like Cherrie was when she sang that song.

Out in the trees, Cherrie's voice had this way of carrying, and echoing in your head worse than that warbly eight-track machine, and since every peach picked and put in the basket was money to us, Daddy didn't have no time to go bopping Cherrie too often 'less she was within quick reach, so's he yelled a lot — only, sorta low, so's the town kids wouldn't hear us, or think he was yelling at them.

And Cherrie'd make that wet little line of her mouth for a while, 'fore she started humming or singing the song, and sometimes I'd sneak a peek

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at the other pickers around us, to see what they thought of Cherrie's singing, and the looks on their faces was like what *I* felt inside, and always when she came to that last line, and the "Alive, alive-O part, like they was longing for something that wasn't gonna come and maybe even *shouldn't* come, but they wanted it anyhow.

Like that singer on the "L.A. Woman" song — only, not even trying to pretend that they was having a good time with the wanting and the needing of . . . *whatever* it was.

After peaches was over, we hit the road again, 'cause it was tomato and cucumber time to the east of us. And the tapes sounded looser, more fluttery in the tape deck, and sometimes Mama took to reaching over to shush Cherrie, and I wondered why she and Daddy just didn't teach Cherrie another song, or why they didn't have her try to hum along with the tapes (the radio was bust on the car when Daddy bought it), but once, at a rest stop, I actually asked Mama about it while she was washing Cherrie up in a ladies' room washbasin, using what little was left of that squirt soap in the dispenser on the wall and a wad of doubled paper towels, but all she said was, "Singin's for them that knows it" — which didn't make no sense at all, so I asked a different way, and as she was drying Cherrie off with fresh towels, Mama said, "It's like pickin's for us who *live* it. We knows it, and it's good to us, 'cept when it rains out a crop, but that's the Lord's will, and none of our doin', so's we just have to make do a little more then. But singin' if you ain't lived the song. . . ." And she let her voice just peter off, like what else she might've had to say wasn't worth the saying, or the thinking of saying.

And it still didn't make no sense, 'cause I'd *heard* her and Dadddy sing, and sing plenty loud and loose and free when they was downing a few poker-game beers, or sharing a bottle of something cheap and potent come the end of the picking season. Only, I never heard them sing *that* song, Cherrie's song, 'least not *recently* —

— and it was Mama washing Cherrie the way she was, with Cherrie sitting in one empty washbasin, with her feet soaking in the next, water-filled basin, that got me to thinking, and remembering.

I was 'bout seven or so — had to be, since Cherrie was already born but not walking yet — and we was staying in this shack in New York State, one with power, and water, and even a real flush toilet like in a gas

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station or rest area (maybe on that last one). It'd been kinda cool out, 'cause Mama had opened up the 'lectric oven and then turned it on, so the heat coil was lit up like a squiggle of neon lighting in a tavern window —only, it didn't say BEER or nothing — and I was sitting on an upended herbicide bucket, like the one Daddy'd sat on when I was two years younger, back when I was standing on the sloping trunk of that huge tree, watching him play cards, and I had my bare feet sticking into the oven, not much further in than half the door, but it felt good, having warm feet, and Mama'd fixed me a cup of coffee with a little Quik tossed in it from an old can of it she'd found on the lone wooden shelf above the cracked and rusted enamel iron sink next to the stove, and put in a little baby formula, too, and I had on one of Daddy's old flannel shirts with the sleeves rolled up to make big cuffs over my sleeper, and behind me, Mama was washing Cherrie in a big plastic pan that's supposed to hold wet cement, and while she was washing Cherrie, Mama was singing that "cockles and mussels" song, real soft, like a lullaby — only, Daddy heard her anyway from where he was resting on the sway-middled sofa in the next room, and yelled something like, "Don't go givin' her none of them *ideas*," like a baby's got much of a mind for accepting ideas, let alone do more than spit up bubbles or poop her diapers.

If Mama sang the song to Cherrie, it wasn't when I could hear it, but as soon as Cherrie could talk halfway plain, she was singing it. Funny how I'd forgot that day, but Mama so seldom bathed either me or Cherrie in a sit-down way. Usually it was a birdbath, from a basin or a pail or whatnot, with no stepping *in* the water, same as Mama and Daddy washed.

As Mama finished drying Cherrie, and Daddy honked the horn outside the rest room, I didn't say nothing else about it, even as the last of the song echoed in my ears, but I wondered why even Mama hated the song now, when she'd taught it to Cherrie in the first place. . . .

Was close to beans time in North Carolina that we picked up again, loaded the car and left the tent we'd been living in, but on Highway 95 the car started overheating, real bad, and we had to park it real close to the bridge going over Lake Marion, so's we wouldn't stall out over the bridge itself. While Daddy tinkered with the car engine, doing whatever it is that men seem born knowing 'bout cars, Mama and Cherrie and I stood outside the car, watching Daddy, and trying not to listen when people'd shout

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rude things out their car windows at us. Like we had "picker" branded on us somehow. We were real close to the lake, a sort of loose, laid-back *L* shape, with a scenic trail close by. Nobody was on the trail, 'least not that time of afternoon-going-on-evening, and since it was so late, Mama took to yawning, and finally told me to watch Cherrie while she sat down next to the car, on the side facing away from the highway. And the people.

Cherrie wanted to go near the lake, and since I was holding her hand, I figured it was O.K. to let her. Since Mama wasn't awake to yell or anything, I figgered Cherrie could maybe sit on the banks of the lake, dangle her feet in the water. Keep her quiet, keep her from singing that dang song, maybe. As we walked closer to the lake, I got to thinking how it'd be nice to put my feet in the water, too. Funny thing, we've traveled for miles and miles up and down the East Coast, yet always managed to stay pretty close inland. I don't know how to swim, not a stroke, can't even paddle in a bathtub. Never *been* in a tub, 'least not that I can remember. But I figgered that as long as I held onto Cherrie near the water, she wouldn't fall in, and I wouldn't have to swim-when-I-couldn't and fish her out.

From where we padded on down to the edge of the lake, it was sorta marshy, sorta squishy underfoot, but the wet felt good. And the sun was low enough in the sky to make the lake look like it was covered with golden scales, patches of color that rippled and flattened in the breeze. Past the lake were trees, a wall of them, or so it seemed; the sun coming off the water made my eyes water, so I squinted and shielded them with my hands, like a visor, and I wasn't sure if I could make out people on the other side, but something smallish was moving, and I wondered, if they were people, if they could see me, if they could tell from that great distance of water if I was a picker or just a *person*, walking near the lake on the way to someplace clean and neat and mine forever, not just another shack or tent or flat of grass under a picnic table or bench; and the more I looked, the more I wanted me to *be* that other person I wasn't quite sure the people across the lake could couldn't see. Not a picker wearing Daddy's old sleeveless T-shirt over a old pair of cutoffs Mama'd found at a laundermat one day on the way from there to *there*, with embedded dirt under my nails, and a daddy whose car radio didn't work at all and the eight-track just barely did, but a *person* other *people* wouldn't be afraid to walk near, or touch even if it was to drop a penny's worth of change into my palm. Not a fruit *tramp*, kneeling under the hot sun until my back

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and neck and shoulders screamed and knotted under my sunburned flesh, and I cried and cried, but Mama and Daddy couldn't stop picking long enough to come over and dry my face, and that was when I wasn't much bigger than Cherrie—

— covering my face with my hands, I suddenly felt cold inside. *I wasn't holding onto Cherrie anymore.* My knees almost buckled, until I heard her singing not too far from me, that little warbling, *keening* voice, singsonging:

Sing$^{in'}$ *'cock*$_{les\ an'}$ *mus*$_{sels/\ Alive,}$ *Alive*$^{-O}$ —

And I let out my held-in breath loose and easy, until I figgered out *where* her voice was coming from, and dropped my hands from my eyes real quick, even though I *knew* there was nothing I could *do* — not with her out in the water like that. But. . . .

Cherrie was out maybe five-ten feet from me — it was hard to tell 'cause the sun glinting on the water made it hard to tell how far away Cherrie was, on account of having nothing close by to compare her with for size. But Cherrie didn't seem to care how far away she was. She was too busy petting something on the water, reaching down past her barely wet feet and *down*, into the water below her, babbling something about the "fishes," and laughing as they touched her fingertips.

And if I squinted my eyes just right, I could *see* them, all the fish darting close to the surface, bobbing up to see what Cherrie was doing there on the water, walking on *top* of them . . . with just the soles of her feet and maybe a quarter-inch more of them submerged, like she was walking on wet pillows or something, the water *giving* only a little as she went further and further away from me, just a little picker baby toddling on the lake, toward the distant, busy shore.

And with every step, the fish darted under her, more and more of them, nearly surfacing to see what the commotion was about, and their scales glinted in the sun, too, like glitter under the sparkling ripples of water; and I was about to wade into the water, to go after Cherrie before she went too far, or wouldn't want to come *back*, when I heard Mama behind and above me—

"Peaches, don't *you* dare."

It wasn't what I expected, not at all. No yelling about Cherrie, no

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screaming that she might drown. Just her not wanting *me* to dare—

Cherrie stopped walking, bending down to look at some fish, while Mama hurried over to stand maybe five feet or so behind me, no closer.

She stared at me, and me at her, and I was about to set foot on the water, to go after Cherrie, but all she said was, "You do it, and nothing'll be right; you'll see."

But I didn't see, least not what she was talking about, so I turned from her, and started to put my foot into or onto the water, when I remembered all them town kids making fun, laughing when they had no cause to, and for a second I imagined me showing all of them what I *could* do, what Cherrie was already doing, and wanting to rub their faces in it, in my difference for a change, because the change was good, it was special, it was different—

But as I rested my foot on the water, the first step on a shimmering golden path that led somewhere that wasn't where *I* was headed, and I saw Cherrie bobbing gently before me, not knowing that where she was was impossible, not knowing that fish weren't things to pet and walk over, like bunnies or kittens, I remembered what Cherrie wasn't old enough to know, wasn't old enough to read of—

No matter what I could or couldn't do once I started out across that lake, folks weren't gonna treat me any better than they did when they called me a "picker" or worse. They hadn't treated Him any better, had they? And he sure as heck wasn't a picker to start out with. . . .

But yet . . . it *seemed* so easy, so natural, watching Cherrie . . . even though I knew enough to know that people have a way of not being kind, or understanding, even when it's something *simple* like being a picker—

"Here, Cherrie. Time . . . to go home," I called to her, and she splashed toward me, arms reaching for me, eyes not on that soft yielding ground at all, until she was in my arms, and I stepped away from the lake and back onto the marshy ground, and Mama was looking at me, just looking sad-like, until she glanced away from me for a second, her longing eyes resting on that molten, strangely unyielding lake beyond, and when she looked back at me, all she said was, "Daddy's got the car fixed."

And I followed her back to Daddy and the car, only looking once over my shoulder at the barred path behind me, and the land I could have no part of on the opposite shore.

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* * *

DADDY HAD to drive for hours and hours to make up for the time we'd lost in South Carolina, and all that time I sat saying nothing in the backseat, and Mama only looked at herself in the mirror outside her window, face not showing anything, but her eyes telling it all, with no need for words, the story plain, though, like she *was* telling it to me:

Don't know how, don't know why, but other people will be people, *and they ain't kind and they ain't right, but long as they're them and we're us, we can't take no more chances, can we?*

The story don't have no beginning, but it don't need one. And it don't have a reason, a *why*, but if it did, I wouldn't want to know it. And it don't make it clear if we're the only ones, or if all us pickers are, or if it's the reason why we pick close to the solid land, seldom venturing by the water where nothing can be harvested by hand, but in the long run, it don't make any difference. Not to a *picker*. And I don't know if Mama's song is part of the story, or something that just makes the longing for what can't be come too close to the surface, like wanting and needing when what you're pining after just can't *be*, 'least not among all them *others* out there.

And Daddy fishes a tape out of the box near Mama's feet, The Doors one again, that singer who I heard somewhere died a long time ago in a bathtub somewhere far over the sea, singing over and over about that woman of his, even though he ain't gonna get her now, and knew even then that he wasn't gonna get her or keep her long even if he did have her, but keeps belting out the song anyway, over and over until his dead voice is lost in a flutter of stretched-out tape, like it's O.K. and not O.K. 'bout him and his woman, 'cause he needs her and can't ever need her, all at once. Like a memory of something that never happened. Like me stepping on that water, and feeling it cushion me, ready to support me for however far it might take to walk across that lake, toward the people who couldn't, wouldn't understand.

And, without Daddy having to tell me, I bop Cherrie a good one when she starts singing that song of hers again.

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Madeleine E. Robins's story, "Willie," provided the inspiration for this month's cover. Madeleine has published a number of novels and short stories. For the last few years, she has worked at Tor Books. She is also the mother of "the World's Most Fascinating Infant." She began writing "Willie" after seeing a clip from the movie Young Frankenstein. *"I had had my usual reaction," she writes. "Impatience with the Doctor, who didn't have the responsibility to follow through on his project. Only after the story was written did I realize that I had incorporated a year's worth of mothering into it. I'm a little chagrined to have been so unconscious about that; on the other hand, I still like my Doctor, for all his ineptitude, better than Victor Frankenstein."*

Willie

By Madeleine E. Robins

THE NIGHT IS STORMY. Each time the sky lightens, the air in the lab is filled with static. The Doctor did not intend to work so late, with the sky acting out a melodrama over the parking lot. But everything has come together at this time, and he and his assistant stand together in the lab, staring at the thing on the table. Finally the Doctor signals and the assistant throws a switch: a charge passes through coils of wire, elaborate structures, at last through the thing on the table. It quivers violently until the current is turned off. The lab is silent except for the breathing of the Doctor and his assistant. Then a beep. Another. As the EKG chitters, the Doctor and his assistant look at one another, awed.

"It's alive," the Doctor murmurs. Then, loudly: "It's alive!" He is overwhelmed; the culmination of his years of work, vindication of his theories, is almost too much for him.

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The thing on the table stirs slightly. It is a hodgepodge of spare parts, some acquired from organ banks, others cloned. It is not pretty: the Doctor's skill is not in surgery, and there are scars and sutures, quite visible, all over its body.

The thing shudders and opens its mouth. The assistant looks nervously at the restraints, as if fearful the thing will break free. The bonds hold. From the mouth of the thing comes a noise, rusty and spasmodic, almost a bleating. The thing is crying.

"What?" the Doctor asks vaguely. In all his planning, he made no provision for this moment, and now the thing on the table is crying, and he cannot think what to do.

"Hungry?" the assistant asks helpfully. The Doctor nods, and the assistant goes to the refrigerator, where he finds half of the sandwich the Doctor had for dinner. Gingerly, he approaches the thing and, tearing off a small piece of corned beef on rye, nudges it between the thing's lips. It is immediately spat out, and the thing wails louder. Why? the Doctor wonders. It has teeth; it can chew. After another attempt, the assistant has an idea. He takes a rubber glove, fills it with tap water, pierces one finger, and prods the finger into the thing's mouth. It sucks contentedly, making small grunting noises. When it finishes, it becomes quiet again.

"Now what, Doctor?" the assistant asks. He is longing for his bed, his fat wife warm beside him. "It's as helpless as a baby."

The Doctor frowns. A baby, that thing on the table that measures six and a half feet in length and weighs close to two hundred pounds? What does he do now? Thinking of the thing as a baby, as something helpless, almost formless, he must revise his initial plan to take the thing on a road show of scientific conferences. You bring a baby into the world, you must take care of it.

He sends the assistant out for baby bottles, cans of liquid nutritional supplement. As an afterthought, he adds adult diapers to the list; already the thing has wet himself. *So many things I did not think of,* he realizes.

Over the next week, he attempts to evaluate the thing's status. His tests confirm: the thing has the musculature of an adult male, but its brain has no idea of how to manage the body. He will have to teach it to hold its head up, focus its eyes, learn its own physical boundaries, walk, talk. He spends two days in the medical library reading monographs on rehabilitative medicine before he understands that he is looking at the

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problem the wrong way. On the way back to the lab, he stops at Waldenbooks and buys Spock, Leach, Brazelton; dozens of books with titles like *What to Expect the First Year* and *Your Baby and You*. He reads them at night, making copious notes, lists of things to buy, to do. The thing continues to lie on the table, crying when hungry or wet or cold, looking soberly at the patterns of light thrown by sunlight in the day, fluorescent lights by night. One eye is blue, the other brown: the Doctor made shift with what he could get.

The Doctor puts his work, his life on hold; he spends his days and nights at the lab, ministering to the thing, which he has named Willie, after his own father, whose name was Wilhelm. He sleeps as Willie's erratic schedule permits; I must train him to a more reasonable schedule, the Doctor tells himself. His assistant, who has four children, is helpful during the day, but insists on going home to his own bed at night. Gradually, Willie begins to sleep through the night, and the Doctor is able to catch five or six hours of sleep himself, on the daybed catercorner to the lab door.

He will say later that his life in this period was an endless round of changing and feeding, punctuated by naps. One night, when Willie refuses to be calmed with food or a fresh diaper, the Doctor thumbs frantically through his books, wondering if this is colic or something more serious. "'Sometimes a child will cry because it is lonely. Comfort and cuddling are as necessary to human beings as to any other animal on the planet.'"

He drops the book into his lap and stares at the thing lying there, weeping with harsh, heartbroken sobs. It is difficult to overcome not simply his physical revulsion at being so close to the thing, but years of training in laboratory protocol, and his own strict and isolated upbringing. Finally the Doctor edges close to Willie and, with some difficulty, raises him to sitting so that the thing's head can rest on his shoulder. Awkwardly, he strokes Willie's coarse hair, murmuring, "Hush now, hush now; it's all right; I'm here."

Willie draws a few more shuddering breaths, then sighs, nestles closer to the Doctor's shoulder, and sleeps. He has discovered his thumb.

Willie's physical progress is more rapid than that of ordinary children; after all, his body is that of a man, however inexpertly he may use it. Early on, for example, he is able to chew his food quite vigorously, but cannot raise

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his cup to his lips to drink. By three months, however, he is able to eat finger foods, drink from a cup, and is beginning to take awkward steps, one and two at a time. The Doctor buys a video camera to record his subject's development. With all Willie's progress, the Doctor is in no way certain of his own ability to accomplish the task he has taken on. How, for example, to toilet train? How to handle the "Terrible Twos"? How to explain to Willie where he came from? He can only take each day as it comes.

The assistant comes less often now; the Doctor sometimes forgets to write out the checks, and there are other jobs available to a man with lab training, as the assistant hurries to point out. The Doctor apologizes: he has been absorbed in Willie's progress. He decides to sublet his condominium and move into the lab, where there is enough room for both Willie and himself. With his own work on hold, the Doctor does not apply for new grants; for a time, they live on his investments while the Doctor looks for some kind of work that he can do at night, after Willie is asleep. The waking hours are too precious, too vital to science. Willie said "Doctor" yesterday — at least the Doctor believes it was "Doctor"; the sound itself was more like "dohda," but the Doctor feels the intent is clear.

REALIZING THAT Willie will need more social input than he himself can provide, the Doctor starts to research preschool programs. The directors of several programs are sympathetic, but few feel they can accommodate a two-hundred-pound two-year-old who is not yet toilet trained. Finally, persevering, the Doctor finds a preschool, and Willie enters with the other two-year-olds. If anything, he is shyer than most, and gentle. His association with the animals in the lab has made Willie careful not to hurt creatures smaller than himself. The other children accept Willie, and while he is subject to the normal politics of infant social groups, he is no different in that way than any other child. The teacher, who began by averting her eyes and shuddering when Willie arrived for school, writes at the end of the year: "Willie is extraordinarily generous and sensitive, with a real gift for making others feel at ease. He loves to finger-paint, and enjoys singing with the class." In truth, Willie's voice is hideously unmusical, but neither he nor his classmates appear to care.

Willie enters first grade a year late, not because he was unable to do

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the work, but because the Doctor was forced to go to court to make the local school district admit his protégé. To ensure that Willie will be well treated, and because he wishes to have some control over the educational process Willie will be subject to, the Doctor becomes an active and vocal member of the PTA. He even, for a time, is a Cub Scout leader. The laboratory, its equipment long shrouded in holland covers, is filled with Willie's stamp collection, his baseball cards, roller skates, his Lego blocks. When Willie brings home his first real report card, his face, his ugly seamed face with the mismatched eyes and jutting brow, shines with pleasure. "Look, Papa, look! I got three A's and two B's!"

The Doctor puts his arm around Willie's shoulders, although he must stand on tiptoe to do so. "I am proud," he says quietly.

Little League is another battle. Parents and the coach argue that there is a real hazard to their children in playing baseball with a two-hundred-pound nine-year-old. Again they go to court, and the judge speaks to Willie in his chambers. Willie's face shines with longing as he speaks of playing ball like the other kids. The Doctor speaks, too: "I want my boy to have all the things any other child would have. What he is, I made him —quite literally. It is not his fault that he is different from other children, and it is not fair that he should be penalized for his very being." The judge rules that, if accommodations can be made to safeguard the players of the opposite team, Willie may play in Little League. After the judgment the Doctor takes Willie out for hot-fudge sundaes. Willie's face is a beatific smear of chocolate, whipped cream, and joy.

There is no puberty per se: Willie was created an adult male. But as his schoolmates begin to go through the tremors of adolescence, Willie feels his own stirrings and confusion. The Doctor again turns to books, trying to find ways to safeguard his boy against what he knows will be the inevitable disappointments. No cheerleader or beauty queen will go out with Willie. For the first time in his life, Willie looks at himself in the mirror and really sees the traces of suturing, the scars, the mismatched eyes, the haphazard arrangement of limbs. When he was building Willie, the Doctor reflects, he did so without regard to the cosmetics of the situation. Were he doing it again today, he would be more careful.

Willie begins to mope, spending his afternoons feeding the few remaining lab animals, doing his homework. His friends call for him, but

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Willie is listless, cannot be cajoled out to the mall or drive-in. The Doctor talks to a few of Willie's friends, and learns that the two girls Willie had asked to the prom had turned him down, one gently, one without tact. The Doctor is surprised at the rage that fills him; he must remind himself that rage is unproductive. Instead, he and several of Willie's friends concoct a plan whereby the youngsters will go to the prom together. Whether Willie understands the purpose of this tactic or not, he goes to the prom and has a wonderful time. The Doctor waits up to hear the stories when the boy returns.

Willie begins to talk about college. The Doctor is not quite easy with the idea that the boy will be so far away, but feels he must support Willie's choice. For a time the table in the laboratory is covered with college catalogs and application forms. They wait together, the Doctor and Willie, and as each envelope comes, they open it with delicious anticipation. Willie is accepted everywhere he applies: his grades are good, his SATs excellent, and the universities are probably too mindful of the potential for a discrimination lawsuit to reject the boy on the grounds that he is a golem. After some discussion, Willie chooses to attend the state university, only half an hour's drive away. The Doctor hides his pleasure, not wishing Willie to feel confined. Willie decides to live on campus, but most weekends he comes home, and he and the Doctor discuss what he is learning. His freshman year, Willie takes English theory, freshman composition, advanced French, and biology. He is gifted in languages, and his French accent is particularly good.

The subject of girls arises again, more than once. Willie has girl friends, but no girlfriend. Privately, the Doctor feels some anger: stupid females, can't they see past Willie's physical defects to the loving and worthwhile person his boy has become? Willie does not blame the girls, but he is lonely. Finally, one weekend, he sits with the Doctor after dinner and begins to talk seriously.

"Father, make a girl for me."

The Doctor shakes his head. "No, Willie. I cannot." He explains that even if he were to assemble the parts, disinter the lab equipment, and duplicate his feat of twenty years before, Willie would still have to wait until the girl grew up. "That was my error: not realizing that you would

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need to be raised like any other child, my boy. If I built a wife for you, who would raise her?" He holds up his hands to the light: paper thin and bony, with the raised veins and wrinkled flesh of age. "I'm not a young man, Willie. I could not do it again."

Willie doesn't hear. He rises from his chair and says, "If you loved me, you'd do it," and storms out.

They are estranged for some time afterward. At night, alone on the daybed in the laboratory, the Doctor wonders, Should I have said yes? Was he asking such a little thing that I should have said yes? But he knows he is right: lately he has taken to monitoring the sinus rhythms of his heart, and knows that he could not undertake to raise another child. It is lonely at the laboratory without Willie's phone calls and Willie's weekend visits. The Doctor's heart is heavy, but his pride will not let him call the boy. Willie's graduation comes and goes; the Doctor has to call the university to learn that the boy was graduated with high honors and distinction in his major field, French literature. He sends Willie a Mont Blanc pen with a note, and tells himself not to mind too much if he hears nothing back.

Willie calls, his voice tentative and cautious. The Doctor invites him for dinner, and Willie accepts. Over dinner: "I want to hear how you've been doing," the Doctor says heartily, and Willie tells him about playing football, about finishing his thesis, about graduate school in the fall. "The university has offered me a teaching assistantship," he says proudly.

"Another scholar in the family!" The Doctor is delighted, slightly drunk, and filled with German sentimentality. He throws his arm around Willie's shoulders and says, "I am proud of you, my son." He does not notice that Willie stoops to permit the embrace: the Doctor is indeed getting old.

THEY FALL again into the old pattern of phone calls and weekend visits. Willie gets his master's degree and, while working toward a Ph.D., is offered an instructorship in the French department. He becomes a popular teacher. The word on campus, he tells the Doctor, is that "I'm gross to look at, but I really understand Racine." Willie chuckles as he quotes.

The Doctor, regarding his son, does not quite understand the reference. Gross to look at? Do students now require that their teachers be Adonises? he wonders.

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* * *

Willie calls at midweek to say that he'll be coming down on Friday this week. And bringing someone. His tone, to the Doctor's sensitive ears, is resonant with excitement. A girl, the Doctor thinks. At last.

On Friday, Willie's car pulls into the parking lot in midafternoon. The Doctor watches from his office upstairs as Willie parks, goes around to the passenger-side door, and opens it for his companion. Such manners, he thinks. The girl stands and takes Willie's arm in a way both firm and affectionate. She has shoulder-length red hair and stands only as high as Willie's breast pocket. The Doctor takes pleasure in the warmth of the smile she gives his son. Still smiling himself, he leaves his office and goes downstairs to greet the arrivals. Only when they are face-to-face does the Doctor realize the girl is blind.

It is a good weekend. The girl, Gwen, knows all about Willie's background and is not troubled by it. For his part, Willie seems to enjoy taking care of Gwen in little ways. Is she good enough for Willie? The Doctor reminds himself that he would have misgivings about any match his son made; Gwen is a fine girl, and Willie loves her. When Willie tells him they want to marry, the Doctor is prepared. He puts a hand on each of their shoulders and gives them his blessing.

The wedding takes place in the university arboretum, and is attended by friends and colleagues of Willie's and Gwen's. Willie still keeps up his friendships from grade school, Scouts, high school, as well as with his co-workers and friends from college days. After the ceremony, when the bride and groom are making their way around the crowd collecting good wishes, the Doctor chats with this person, then that. Everyone says what a fine man Willie is, and the Doctor agrees. He talks animatedly with members of the science faculty who are there; several of them profess to have read his monographs from years before. It is only as he walks away that he hears the associate professor of anatomy say to his colleague, "So that's what became of him? A brilliant mind, despite his crackpot theories, and then he just dropped out of the scientific community."

The colleague nods. "Just couldn't keep up with the field, I suppose." They walk away to get more punch.

Willie and Gwen live in faculty housing on campus. Twice a month,

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they visit the Doctor, bringing the baby with them. Watching his son with the baby, the Doctor thinks sentimentally, "Were you ever so tiny?" then feels foolish, remembering the effort with which, long ago, he gathered his massive son into a similar embrace. He finds in time that handling little Alice is no more difficult. Sometimes the Doctor watches over her so her parents can go hear a concert or take a walk alone together. When she is fed and changed, the Doctor raises her into the crook of his arm — so very tiny, he thinks — and hums rustily to her. Sometimes he strokes her silky hair and murmurs, "Hush now, hush now; it's all right; I'm here."

The baby watches him with trusting eyes and falls asleep.

"Can't we settle this in a civilized manner!"

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

ALL CHILDREN GREAT AND SMALL

DURING THIS past election year, Vice President Dan Quayle did much of his speechifying on "family values." And our favorite Mr. Potatoe Head isn't the only one. Democratic second-lady-in-waiting Tipper Gore has made that same topic the focus of her public life.

To hear them tell it, America would be a happier, healthier place if we could only control popular culture better. Have a shotgun wedding for that reluctant bride, Murphy Brown. Wash out the mouths of all those heavy metal and rap performers with a good lye soap, and tell them they won't get another record contract until they learn how to impersonate the Osmonds.

If only our problems *could* be that easily solved. But it doesn't matter how many times Ripley dies for our sins, millions of American adults will still be out of work and millions of our youngsters will still attend inadequate schools. The political elite has always pointed fingers at the "cultural elite" — as Dan likes to call us — to deflect criticism away from themselves. (How many of you are old enough to remember the almost identical antics of Nixon's V.P. Spiro T. Agnew?)

Yet there's no denying that Americans are plum worried about our families. We've seen the grim statistics about divorce, and the horrifying numbers on abuse. What's a mother to do . . . when she herself is the Adult Child of an Alcoholic Overeating Compulsive Gambler? When the basic social unit, upon which we all depend for essential supports, has been diagnosed as "dysfunctional," we all feel sick.

Popular culture isn't the cause of all this, however. It is merely the proverbial mirror of our social malaise. A movie like *Prince of Tides* may take (what Barbra

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Streisand and Pat Conroy presented as) a realistic view of the wounded family. A science fiction schlocker can do the same thing without the preening self-importance and the angst-overload.

Honey, I Shrunk the Kids (1989) is the kind of movie I mean. I found it to be a delightful fantasy film for the whole (dysfunctional) family, in the great tradition of *The Absent-Minded Professor* (1961) and its sequel, *Son of Blubber* (1963). That fact, alone, was enough to make the film a hit. But the men who wrote the movie — Ed Naha and Tom Schulman wrote the screenplay based on a story by Stuart Gordon, Brian Yuzna, and Mr. Naha — added an extra layer of social commentary relating to the travails of American family life and horrors of childhood.

The presentation of heavy-duty thematic material in an *un*heavy-handed manner is one of my yardsticks for a quality film with wide-ranging appeal. *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* measured up.

It all started when Wayne Szalinski (Rick Moranis), a latter-day absent-minded professor, accidentally zapped his two children and the two neighbor boys with his experimental reduction ray. Yet even before he shrunk the kids, Wayne's family had been a tad out of whack.

Wayne's mind was often absent from his family, but usually well-focused on his inventions. Lost in his attic experiments, he left the burden of financial support to his wife, Diane (Marcia Strassman), a real estate agent. With the stress of keeping house, and selling houses, Diane wants to run away from home. Meanwhile, their kids are forced to fend for themselves.

Daughter Amy (Amy O'Neil) cooks and cleans and plots her escape to the mall. Young Nick (Robert Oliveri) eagerly tries — in vain — to capture his dad's attention with his own inventions. You get the feeling that the Szalinski kids could do with a little more care and attention from their career-oriented parents. But it could be worse. They could belong to a model middle-American family like the Thompsons next door.

Big Russ Thompson (Matt Frewer) is a type-A family man. He gives his two sons plenty of attention. In fact, he can't seem to get off their backs. Big Russ wants Little Russ (Thomas Brown) to be more like the old man: athletic, aggressive, driven. Nothing less than Big Man on Campus is acceptable. His diminutive older son can't help but be a constant source of paternal disappointment. Little brother Ron (Jared Rushton) works extra hard not to let dad down. It's his jock posturing that sends a baseball into

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the Szalinski attic, inadvertently causing disaster.

Normal-sized, the four children are, in different ways, belittled and ignored by their parents. Wayne Szalinski's electron gun merely brings the children's physical stature in synch with their familial status. Microscopic, their parents can't see them. (Nothing new there.) Nor can they hear the children's cries for help. (Could they before?) Moranis actually sweeps his own children up, like dirt, and throws them away.

Without really slugging us over the head with sub-text, the screenplay of *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* creates an amusing allegory of childhood heightened to a point approaching night terror. The movie's young heroes are caught in a world where everyone (and everything) is much bigger than they are. Their plight is an exaggeration of what all children experience emotionally. They feel constantly at risk in the capricious and dangerous world controlled by adults. There's the possibility of abandonment. Or worse! (In a scene a Freudian could have a field day with, Moranis almost gobbles down his own son, as he desperately clings to a milk-sodden Cheerio.)

And the natural world seems just as filled with threat. There are jaws that bite, and claws that catch — even in the relative safety of one's own backyard. The adventure of the Szalinski and Thompson kids brings those terrors to life. But if that were all it did, today's children and all us former-children wouldn't have embraced the movie with so much enthusiasm.

Honey, I Shrunk the Kids works because it is also an empowering adventure story. Facing gigantic odds, the four young people stare them down together. And together they find food, tame wildlife, and defend themselves against attack. Cooperatively, they cope with every problem their big new world dishes out. When Dad finally notices them, he brings them back to normal size, but these four new-found friends will *never* be the same. Stronger and more confident, they're now capable of anything.

Not a bad lesson for a child to take away from a science fiction comedy. I only wish Disney's new sequel, *Honey, I Blew Up the Kid,* was half as insightful about surviving childhood. But this new science fiction comedy is all gimmick and no substance.

Wayne Szalinski is now doing his experiments for a large Nevada corporation. His budget is bigger, and that's what he's aiming for with his new and improved electro-magnetic particle beam: Bigger. But he can never quite achieve the results

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he wants until the day when Nick, now in high school, and his baby son Adam (Daniel and Joshua Shalikar) tag along with dad to the lab. Little Adam wanders into an experiment at precisely the wrong moment and starts to grow at an alarming rate.

At first, his size remains in human range. At seven feet, Wayne and Nick try to smuggle him back in the lab for unzapping dressed up like a bee-keeper with a loud suit. They pass him off as Uncle Yanosh from the old country. But when the giant tyke continues to react to electrical stimulation in his environment, he begins to resemble Uncle King Kong.

The special effects employed in *Honey, I Blew Up the Kid* are certainly far superior to those of its predecessor. (And, at an expenditure of approximately $8 million, they ought to be.) Perhaps a little more should have been spent on writing. A committee of authors was hired, including Thom Eberhardt, Peter Elbling and Garry Goodrow, who also wrote the sotry. (Only eagle-eyed viewers will notice the well-buried "Special Recognition" of Kit Reed for her story "The Attack of the Giant Baby.")

With so many men at work on it, it's a pity the resulting storyline has so little power. *Blew Up* relies far too heavily on the talents of the film's technical wizards and the cutes of its toddler twin stars to charm the audience. And most audience members were indeed delighted to see a not-so-tiny tot stomp his way down the Vegas strip. Nevertheless, *this* viewer was mightily frustrated that the challenging thematic material of the first film was ignored along with the tantalizing possibilities of this turnabout tale.

A really daring film would have gone all the way with actions of a Godzilla-sized infant. At 112 feet tall, a baby would do real damage. At the very least, it would have accidentally stomped scores of pedestrians. And, in the throes of a "terrible twos" tantrum, the baby's rage could have easily surpassed the fury of the three-headed Ghidrah.

Think of the philosophical issues involved! A child, well shy of the "age of reason," goes on an innocent killing spree. How should society respond to such carnage?

Okay, I know that a PG Disney film ain't gonna run with that one. Still, *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids did* deal with death issues. When the ant — a creature most of us would kill without qualm — dies after defending the children, the audience shares the grief of the young heroes, and gets a lesson in the value of "lower" life forms.

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Honey, I Blew Up the Kid plays it safe, refusing to assign its monster baby a killer role. It also avoids the ethical issues surrounding corporate (and presumably military) sponsorship of the affable Szalinski's research in blowing things up. Then, why not have more fun with the symbolism of a larger-than-life baby? A child *dominates* the life of his parents from the moment he is born. He is messy, destructive, and needy. And *still* we love him. Take this tale of heightened reality and let it speak to our common experience of parenting or of being older sibling to a li'l monster.

Blew Up almost touches on these issues — but never quite. Even though the filmmakers themselves know what it's like to be controlled by a cranky tot. (Evidently the two little Shalikar brothers were sometimes less than cooperative about taking direction.) You'd think that director Randal Kleiser would want to put some of his own frustrations to work in his movie. Instead, he creates an unswervingly bright and cheery movie that will leave more sophisticated viewers unsatisfied.

Small children, on the other hand, are likely to find *Honey* 2 a gleeful romp. For them, the adventures of a giant kid will represent two hours of fantasy fulfillment. To say "No!" to a nap and have the power to back it up would be heaven. (Q: Where does a 112 foot baby toddle to? A: Anywhere it wants.) If youngsters leave the movie frustrated, it's only because the baby never gets to *really* throw his weight around. "Little" Adam might have broken into a Devil Dog factory and consumed a giant vat of creme filling or found a Union-Pacific choo-choo, loaded with coal, to play with. Or he might have stomped his "big" brother as if he were a bug. Now *that* would have been escapist entertainment for a six year old.

But not, I fear, entertainment in keeping with good "family values." So instead we get something tame, devoid of texture, and utterly predictable. I thought it was a bore. A sorry sequel to one of the better kids' films of recent years. Danny Boy Quayle and his crowd probably found it unobjectionable, however.

Yet, when you think about it, you realize that Murphy Brown will be a much better Mom than Wayne Szalinski is a Dad. Murphy may leave the child with a nanny but she's unlikely to carelessly zap her son with an electro-magnetic partical beam. Maybe the Szalinski kids should forget about the Veep's views on acceptable family structure and explore the advantages of a daddyless lifestyle, too. They'd probably live longer.

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I sold "Perennials" to F&SF over two years ago, six months before my father died. Still, I must have known something was about to happen: the story has a quiet certainty about it, a foreknowledge that was not part of my conscious thoughts. Amazing the games the mind can play . . .

Perennials

By Kristine Kathryn Rusch

IN REAL TIME the destruction looks different. I stand at the edge of the Pacific Garden Mall and see flat concrete, large holes surrounded by wire fences, a few shored-up buildings, and innumerable parking lots.

Last summer, eucalyptus trees covered the mall. Buildings — a few that had survived the '06 quake — lined the streets. Street musicians hung out on corners; bicyclists and pedestrians filled the sidewalks. The place had the kind of life that too few cities experience.

I had always loved that life. To me, it was the heart of Santa Cruz.

I don't like real time. As I stand here, hands in the pockets of my windbreaker, staring at the remains of the destruction, I see the city as a newcomer would see it: a broken, deserted downtown, like so many other downtowns in so many other places. Newcomers would think that Santa Cruz has charm anyway. The Boardwalk, with its famous roller coaster

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and sea view, still stands. Shops dominate the pier. Funky older houses line tree-covered, winding streets. There are only a few of us who know, a few of us who remember, and we will never forget.

When I was a little girl, my grandmother's house smelled of peppermint. I loved the kitchen. Light streamed in from two windows and the screen door. Grandma's collection of saltshakers lined one window like a curtain. On the counter, chocolate cake with marshmallow frosting cooled. The cookie jar waited on top of the refrigerator for that special moment during the day when Grandma would reward us for being ourselves.

In her bedroom the portraits hung: Grandma's mother in 1886, at twenty-six a foreboding woman with dark eyes; Grandma's entire family around 1910, arranged from tallest to shortest, Great-aunt Ruth (always the gregarious one) with a bow the size of a Stetson hat tied in her hair; Grandma, Grandpa, my father, and Aunt Mary in the forties — Grandma looking the same, shoulders back, gaze straightforward and proud; Grandpa smiling, his hair nearly gone, hand holding his only daughter's; Aunt Mary looking young and happy; and my father, wearing black-rimmed glasses, his body still young-man trim, and his hairline receding like his father's, with an impish grin that I had seen only when he played cards. I used to lie on Grandma's bed and stare at the pictures as I tried to conjure the family ghosts. No hauntings ever came — no shaking chains, no eerie voices. But some of the pictures seemed alive. On those nights when I slept on the cot at the foot of Grandma's bed, I would wake to whisperings that I attributed to my great-grandmother and my grandfather, both of whom died shortly before I was born. The whisperings were always too faint to hear, but I felt the love in them, just as I felt the love in my grandmother's gaze.

I take my car from the mall to the Boardwalk. The drive is familiar, except for the cracked windows, the fallen signs. The road itself has lost its smoothness, and the car rocks in the ruts. I keep the radio off, listening instead to the whoosh of other cars as they pass, the honking horns, the occasional shouts of pedestrians as they walk down the twisting streets.

The morning looks no different than any other, even though it should. I know that if I turn down the right street, I'll find my tiny one-room apartment, filled with books and newspapers, an overlarge stereo, and a sofa bed; a place that's less of a haven than somewhere to sleep. I clerk at

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the local grocery store and put most of my money into a savings account that I never touch. My grandmother and I share a social life with each other — made up of each other — which she said is normal for a woman of ninety-five, but not for a woman of thirty. She would tell me I need to live in my present and work for my future, and I would always laugh and tell her life is easier in the past.

The Boardwalk looms, a barrier against the sea. The view is both dated and modern: the old wooden roller coaster dominates the skyline, making the newer flume ride and the Giant Dipper seem cheap and brassy. I park my car in the empty parking lot and walk to the gate. Someone has locked it and placed a CLOSED sign against the metal bars. Through the doors, past the concession stands and the shored-up rides, the ocean whispers against the beach. The air smells of sea salt and fresh wind instead of cotton candy and corn dogs. My hands sink deeper into my pockets, and the nylon strains against my knuckles.

On hot summer days, the parking lot was full, and cars circled the street like hungry cats. I walk back to my car, alone in a place that I never believed could be lonely. I pull the car door open and stand for a moment before crawling inside. Across the street a cyclone fence surrounds an empty field. Scraggles of winter grass cover the choppy earth. Something sat there, something I should remember. My mind yields up no images, no pictures of the spot, though I had once gone by it daily. I get into the car, close the door, and huddle against the steering wheel. One tiny fragment gone — dispersed by the sands of time.

On the day my Aunt Esther died, I arrived home from school to find my mother scrubbing the kitchen floor. Dirt streaked her face, except for the places where hours-dried tears had cleaned the skin. I touched her shoulder, and she shook me away.

"Get off my floor." Her voice was harsh and raw. I had never heard its peculiar edge before.

I stood for a moment, wanting to ask details — the school counselor had told me only that my aunt, my mother's favorite sister, was dead —wanting to hold my mother, to comfort her, to share the pain. Instead, I walked across the clean linoleum into the living room and sat on a transplanted kitchen chair in the growing twilight until my father came home.

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He made us dinner on the well-scrubbed stove, and then he put my mother to bed. I huddled under one of my grandmother's afghans on the couch and listened to my father's voice drone as he made the arrangements by phone. When he finally came into the living room, looking smaller than I had ever seen him, his balding head shining in the lamplight, I asked, "What are we going to do?"

"We're going to remember her," he said. "That's all we can do."

The empty field mocks me. I can see nothing but the diamond wires of the cyclone fence, the clumps of dirt, the shades of ancient footprints. If I go back six months, I will see it. I will know.

I reach for a time slip, feel its power hum against my fingertips, but as I try to grasp the rim, the slip scuttles away, and I remain in real time, clutching the steering wheel of a twenty-year-old car, a car I've owned for only half a day.

Somewhere I will find a place that hasn't changed, a place where the past, present, and future have fused, a place that is safe.

I turn the key in the ignition, and the car hums into life. As I pull out of the parking lot, a dozen other cars appear from nowhere. Perhaps we all are searching for the same thing.

FOUR DAYS after my aunt's funeral, I found my first time slip. I lay on my bed in the upstairs of the creaky old Victorian house my mother had just cleaned top to bottom. I was almost asleep, when a light-filled slit like that of a half-opened door appeared in the air before me. I had seen those slits before, several dozen times in my young life. When I was four, the night my sister (who was my mother surrogate) married, hundreds of light slits appeared in my room. I cowered against the wall and screamed for help. No help came. My parents, too drunk from the wedding, slept through all my cries. Finally the lights faded, and I fell into an uneasy sleep. Over the years, though, my fear receded, and I thought the lights were dream visions that passed into my waking hours.

That night, though, I knew I wasn't asleep. Another slit appeared, and another, until they surrounded me, and their light felt like a hug. No one had hugged me since my aunt died. No one had said more than three sentences to me in all that time — except my grandmother, who tried to

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comfort me by phone from her home six hundred miles away.

I reached out, perhaps to hug back, perhaps just to touch, when I felt something hum against my fingertips. I stuck my hand inside the nearest light, and felt a solid edge. I grabbed the edge, pulled a little —

And found myself in my Aunt Esther's dining room. The room smelled of cigarettes, roast beef, and fresh bread. Bottles of alcohol covered the bureau, and half a dozen people sat around the table. The chandelier sent a crystal light across the room. It took a moment to recognize the man at the head of the table as my uncle. He was too slim, his hair too dark. My parents sat on one side, my mother's hair long and black and coiled around her scalp, my father looking like the picture in Grandma's bedroom. Aunt Esther came out of the kitchen, carrying one of her good serving bowls filled with broccoli in cheese sauce. She was beautiful: her face unlined, her eyes wide and dark. Her hair, cut in its usual marcel, didn't seem dated, but looked appropriate somehow. She set the bowl down, and the woman across the table — not my mother, but someone else I vaguely recognized — stubbed out a cigarette. My uncle carved the roast beef, while my father picked up the bowl filled with mashed potatoes and plopped a spoonful on his plate. My mother took the bowl from him and looked at Aunt Esther.

I walked to the table and took a little piece of meat. It was good and hot. I hadn't had Esther's cooking since my uncle died.

"All this food," Mother said. "We should say grace."

"Father would have said grace." Aunt Esther's voice was smoother, less rough than I remembered it, as if the years of cigarettes and alcohol hadn't touched it yet. "But I figure we earned it — why should we eat it after it gets cold?"

"Esther." My uncle placed a slab of roast beef on his own plate. He didn't look up, but I could hear the caution in his tone. I touched his shoulder, hoping he would pull his chair back, but he didn't notice me.

Esther took a sip from the drink beside her ashtray. "I don't have to do everything my father taught me. He's been dead for twenty years. And if he were here, he wouldn't be thankful for the food. He would yell at me for all the paint I wear, the booze I drink, and the things I say."

"You shouldn't speak ill of the dead," my mother said softly.

"See what I mean?" Esther said. "She was only four when he died, and she can mimic his voice perfectly. Some people always haunt you."

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The scene faded. I reached for my uncle, but found myself grabbing my own bedspread, the smell of roast beef and cigarettes still lingering in my nostrils. I hugged my pillow and waited until dawn for the lights to return. They didn't, and I fell into an uneasy sleep.

I have driven along the ocean for over an hour. Finally I pull into an empty turnout at the edge of a cliff and get out of my car. The wind is cold here, the ocean rough and gray. Waves break against the rocks below me. Off in the distance, heavy, dark clouds threaten a major winter storm.

The ocean is here, ever present, ever changing, never reassuring. I reach for a time slip, and can't even find one, shivering as a chill runs up my back. Used to be I could slip anywhere, anytime. I would close my eyes and reach until I felt the hum. Then I would grab a corner and pull myself into another world.

My grandmother would say it was as if I had disappeared from my eyes. She never knew where I went, and I would never know where I was going, only that I would find somewhere better than I was. She hated it when I was gone. But the time slips never lasted long. I would get a brief glimpse and then come back to the present. I saw bits of my parents' lives, bits of wars, bits of places I would never see again. When I went through high school, the lights faded, but the hums remained. I learned to control the slips, to go anywhere I wanted. And often I would end up in Santa Cruz, on the Boardwalk or in the mall, places where time had a special essence, an added dimension of warmth.

Sea droplets splash my face. I draw my windbreaker closer. This is a place I would have visited in a slip, but it feels wrong in real time. Less powerful, less potent. If I were able to slip now, I would return to my grandmother's house, steal a fingerful of marshmallow frosting, and lie on her bed, staring at the photos. I would listen to the whispers, the hauntings, and if I heard my grandmother's step, slow and sure across her linoleum, I would run to the kitchen, hug her, and never let her go.

Some of the water drops running down my face are warm. I wipe my cheeks, irritated at the moisture, and turn my back on the sea. It is not home, it is not safe, and it has no warmth.

Last week the phone woke me out of a sound sleep. Grandma was in the emergency room, bleeding from countless ulcers in her ninety-five-

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year-old stomach. She was screaming for me, they said. Even if she hadn't been, I still would have rushed to the hospital.

The hospital had a Sunday-morning quiet. The walls were painted forest green, and the plush carpet absorbed all sound. I hurried to the emergency wing, and they ushered me to a back room. My grandmother lay on a bed, held down by a doctor and three nurses. Her gray hair was matted around her face; her watery blue eyes were wide with fright. When she saw me, she murmured, "Thank God. Thank God."

"You're her granddaughter?" the doctor asked. He was my age, but his frustration made him seem younger. "We need to put some tubes down her to pump the blood from her stomach. But she won't let us."

The tubes went through the nostrils. I remembered my mother hooked up like that in the years before the alcohol finally killed her.

Grandma grabbed my hand. She squeezed so tight that I knew I would bruise. "They're hurting me," she said.

"They have to hurt you to help you," I said.

"Will you stay while we try again?" the doctor asked. "Maybe she'll be calmer around you."

I nodded. They brought the tubes to her nose, and Grandma screamed and thrashed. I put my hands on her shoulders, held her head in place, and she stopped moving. All the while they worked, she watched me, staring into my eyes as if my presence gave her strength. Finally everything was in place, the suction began working, and the tubes turned black with her blood.

The doctor thanked me and took the nurses outside. Grandma closed her eyes and sighed once. I reached for a time slip, a short moment somewhere better, when her grip tightened on my hand.

"Stay." Her voice was wispy, a little girl's.

"I'm right here," I said.

"No." She shook her head once. I brushed the hair from her forehead. "Stay in your eyes. You aren't living when you're running away."

I pulled over a chair and sat down, never letting go of her hand. For that entire week, I stayed. But she didn't.

This morning she left.

I'm back on the mall, staring at the empty spots, the holes, the missing pieces. I can't slip away anymore, can't run to some better spot in someone

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else's life. In my week's stay, the ability to slip left me. I ramble through this broken place, where pieces of the past have shattered like concrete against the force of the earth, and I know that parts have already left my memory — perhaps to form other time slips that other children can run away to.

I guess, Grandma would say, it is time to start living in the present and planning for the future.

I guess I'm as ready as I'll ever be.

Beside me on the cyclone fence, a work permit flutters in the breeze. Across the street, enterprising merchants have set up large tents filled with heat and light and merchandise. I walk over there, away from the demolished Cooper House, the shored-up western facades, the buildings of handmade brick that had survived the '06 quake and had died in this one. A little bit of history passed on. A life spanning nearly a century, punctuated by two quakes and, in the end, some lingering pain.

A woman sells plants outside the nearest tent. She sits next to the tent wall, clutching a steaming paper cup, and watches me. I glance at the plants, little shoots in green plastic pots, and I know that she is here, hoping that people will plant for spring.

"I want some flowers." My voice cracks as if I never use it. "Perennials."

She shows me more shoots in more green plastic pots. I buy six that bloom in different light and temperature. Flowers for my grandmother's grave, always and forever. Always changing, always there. One small way — my only way — to control a bit of time. . . .

And to keep it warm.

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Nancy Springer has written novels for both children and adults. Her next adult fantasy, LARQUE ON THE WING, will be published by Avon. Atheneum has just published her latest fantasy for children, THE FRIENDSHIP SONG. "Damnbanna" is a crossover piece that could easily be a short young adult novel. It is a story about the attraction of good and evil — and of the gray areas in between.

DAMNBANNA

By Nancy Springer

I WAS RUNNING BY MYself, somewhere in the gap between the girl pack and the straggler boys. Probably I could have kept up with the boy pack if I had been allowed to start with them — I was stronger and taller than the other girls — but Coach always sent off the boys first so they'd keep their minds on their running and let the girls do the same. Cross-country running depends a lot on what's going on in your mind. My father was proud of me for going out for cross-country. He said of all the sports except maybe wrestling, it took the most heart. My mother was proud, too, sort of, but she would have been happier if I'd joined something more feminine instead, like maybe Daughters of Neurotics. She said she worried that something would happen to me, out running along country roads for two hours every afternoon.

The sky was full of gray clouds, the way it always gets in November, and the sun behind them was making it into a big golden chariot wheel like a promise of glory, and my chest and legs were feeling a little bad, which meant I was doing good, and I was looking up ahead at a hill I had to pull

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and thinking about the runner's high waiting for me at the top. Nothing else in my life up till then had felt as good as the rush I got from cresting a rise and knowing I was strong. It was like I could just keep going forever, it felt like flying.

Forget it this time, though.

I still think the black dog came literally out of nowhere. I mean, I was running between open fields — I should have seen it before it attacked me, but I didn't — and it never even growled before it jumped me and clamped its jaws on my leg behind my knee. It brought me down like a wolf bringing down a moose. One second I was stretching my stride, and the next thing I knew, the asphalt was flying up at me, and there was a roar like out of Hell's belly and a swirl of gravel and something made out of black hide and hard muscle mauling me.

So I got to try out for wrestling after all. I must have rolled over, I was facing upward, and the thing seemed huge and hard to understand against the sky; it was a demon silhouette, all teeth and lunge and snarling muscle, going for my neck, and I was holding it off. Just barely. It tore my face and hands before I managed to fling it to one side, and then I was trying to get up or scramble away or something, anything, but I couldn't — my legs weren't working right, and the breath was knocked out of me, and the black devil was too fast, it was coming at me again — and I felt so weak and sick and soul-scared I knew this time it was going to get me —

There was another swirl, there were spokes bright as a chariot's, a bike wheel on the road beside me slamming full tilt into the black dog's ribs.

Which should have sent it off yipping, but it didn't, and I knew it wouldn't, I knew already that this was not just another vicious stray; I had seen its eyes — and it was on top of me again, lunging at my neck, and I had breath to scream but I couldn't seem to lift my hands to wrestle it again —so much for being strong; lie on the asphalt long enough, and you can forget being strong. I felt hot slobber burn my throat. Wanted to close my eyes, but I couldn't. I watched everything. I saw Damnbanna coming — the boy on the bike, the new kid, the one who lived at the Juvenile Home, the one we all called a freak. I saw him pull the black dog off me. I saw how his lips bared his teeth so that he snarled the way it did as it turned on him. I saw it clamp its jaws onto his forearm, and I saw him lift the arm, using it to swing the dog up off its feet, never mind how its teeth tore into him — he threw it clear over his head so that it landed hard on the roadway. I saw him cat-

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quick turn and pick it up again, and I saw him break its neck with his bare, deformed hands.

Then he was kneeling beside me, and it was lying on the roadway behind him, dying, and I saw —

"Don't look at him," Damnbanna told me. His hair, long and dark, hung wild around his shoulders, making him another gargoyle shape against the sky. He had a real name, but I didn't know what it was, even though Coach had told us when he got to feeling sorry for him and made him team manager. Everybody just called him Damnbanna, for damn bandanna, because he always wore one, red usually, as a headband, like a bloody bandage over his scarred face. He was hard to look at. Even when I managed to make my eyes adjust and focus on him, it was no real improvement: a single ugly scar would have been easier to take than the way his face was, most of it, layered with scars, like the skin had been turned to leather by scarring. His nose was flat and pushed off to one side from beatings. The lines of his lips were blurred. Seeing him looking down at me, and seeing what was happening behind him — which was the black dog's spirit filling the sky and blotting out the sun — it was like being a spectator in Hell.

Damnbanna took my hand. "Don't look," he told me again, as if he knew somehow about what was going on in the air behind him. Huge fangs fish-belly white. Bloody red eyes blazing in a tar-black cloud. And he seemed to know how I felt that black-dog spirit pulling, pulling at me with teeth that were locked in my soul. How it wanted to take me with it. How its mouth was a doorway into death.

"Look at me!" Damnbanna ordered. "Look straight into my eyes. Don't look at anything else." His voice was low, calm, urgent. "He's not going to get you," he promised me. "I'm uglier than him."

It was the way he smiled, a wide, sudden smile of that torn-leather mouth, that let me do what he said. I looked straight into his eyes — they were honey brown, like creek water on a summer day, and they took me in and protected me from the black hound that was hunting me, and I knew he was gutsy and fierce and that I was safe with him.

"What's your name?" I asked him.

"Shhh. Don't try to talk."

His eyes went away, and I was back to lying on the side of the road again, and for a moment I was frightened. But it was all right, I was going to live. The black spirit was gone from the air. There was just a dog's body lying in

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the road, and people were standing all around, teammates, gawking down at me, and Damnbanna was still with me, tying his sweatshirt tight around the bloody mess the dog had made of my leg. Then he was pulling off his T-shirt, and I glimpsed his back, the hard, slim wedge shape of his back and shoulders, welted and scarred all over, only half-hidden by his mustang mane of hair. He wadded the cloth and turned to press it against the cuts on my face, and there were scars on his bare, beautiful chest as well. I wanted to cry.

"My eyes," he told me very softly. "Just look into my eyes. Forget the rest."

I did it, and fell in love with him, and swam in a place that was warm brown and full of wood-thrush song until I woke up in the hospital.

I remembered him from the first day of school. He was new, and got off the Juvenile Home bus, which might have been reason enough for Heath Whipperman to pick on him even if his face had been normal-looking, which it definitely was not. Of course, right away Heath and his football buddies spotted the kid somebody had messed up bad, and they moved in on him.

"Christ." Heath was so impressed he sounded almost friendly. "God, you're ugly. How'd you get that ugly, little boy?"

Heath was big. The new kid was about my height, tall for a girl or average for a boy, but he looked big as Heath the way he stood there not moving an inch when Heath crowded him. His face was a shock, all right, but I liked his body, I admired it the way I would admire a sports car or a well-built colt, the slim, just-right lines of his legs and back, the way he held his head up. He made me think of a knife blade poised there to cut Heath small. Which would have been nice, and I think he could have done it, but it was not just Heath. It was a bunch of them, including one fullback the size of a U-Haul.

Heath kept at it. "Answer me, freak face. What did you do to it, put it in a flywheel?"

"What's the headband for?" One of the other jocks tried to be clever. "Hold together what's left of it?"

They all laughed like crows. Heath yelled, "Let's see if it falls apart!" and made a grab for the headband, but the new kid knocked his hand away with a quick, hard blow that moved only his fist and arm, not his stance or face,

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like it was nothing, no trouble. He hadn't said a word, but he didn't need to. The message was getting through: he could handle himself. I didn't talk much either, and someday I wanted to be able to handle myself, too.

Heath got hot. "Gimme that damn bandanna, freak!"

"Yeah, take off that damnbanna," the U-Haul agreed, fumbling it. Too much playing without a helmet as a kid, maybe. Heath took time out to laugh.

"Damnbanna," he said, and they all hooted and started chanting it — "Damnbanna, Damnbanna" — and they were scuffling with him. It was just a sort of shoving contest, not serious fighting yet. I had a feeling he could have hurt them if he had tried — even though I had not yet seen him take on a killer dog with his bare hands, I felt that way. He wasn't sweating any, his scarred face was quiet and still, and none of them got that piece of red cloth off his head. It made them mad. They were just getting ready to go after it for real when a teacher came out and made them stop.

"Damnbanna," Heath taunted as the bell rang for us to go inside. "See you later, Damnbanna boy."

I was trying to be like the others back then. Or at least not to appear very different — though really, I knew I didn't fit in: I didn't giggle with a gaggle of girls, I didn't flirt with guys. But I had a few friends, and the other kids tolerated me O.K., which was all I really wanted from them, so I did what they did. I called the new boy Damnbanna when I talked about him, and I stayed away from him because his face gave me the willies. Not that I was much for going up to new people anyway. Mostly I kept to myself — up until the moment I swam into the strange boy's eyes and lost my heart in them.

TWO DAYS after the black dog changed my life, I was home, feet up on the family room sofa, lying there with Pepsi and pain pills and a stack of schoolwork, when he walked in. His real name, I knew by then, was Deil. It had been in the newspaper. All the kids on the cross-country team were calling him Deil now, according to what some of the girls told me on the phone. I'd let them know I wanted to see him and thank him, so they came to visit me that day after practice, and they brought him along.

The girls all came in quietly and said, "Hi, Angel," almost in a whisper, and lined up against the walls. The way my mother had the house decorated,

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heavy on the tassels and swags, who could blame them for acting as though they were at a viewing in a funeral parlor. Though really, I guess they were feeling shy because of all my bandages. They'd heard I was going to have some scarring on my face. What a tragedy. As though I were Miss America to start with.

But Damnbanna, the scarring expert, came in and padded straight over to me on his bare, bent feet — he wasn't comfortable in shoes, he went barefoot every minute he wasn't in school, no matter how cold it got, even when he was riding along with us on his bike while we ran. He didn't say anything, but sat down on the floor close to me and looked up at me with his headband lying like a crown on his brow.

I couldn't show him much of what I felt, not with everyone watching. "Thank you for what you did," I told him. He was a hero, of course — to the doctors, the cops, my coach, my parents, the team, the whole school, and half the town, not just to me. But none of those people knew all of it.

"Forget it," he said quietly, and I was the only one who knew what he really meant: forget the impossible things that had happened, the power of his eyes, forget how badly I had needed his rescue, forget about a fanged specter menacing in the air; tell myself I had dreamed it all, turn my back and think of life and not of a glimpse into the hungry mouth of death.

But there had been a glimpse of him also. Of his hungry, lonesome, rebel soul.

"I'm not about to forget," I told him.

"Yes, Deil, we don't know how to thank you for saving Angel's life." My mother had hurried in, and I could tell that something about him made her nervous, because she was talking fast. "Just saying it isn't enough."

Without quite meaning to, I had put out my hand to him, and his came up to touch it. His fingers, resting in mine, were mutilated, all fused together and curled into a paw by bands of scar tissue. I wanted to look into his eyes again, but I knew I didn't dare, not in front of everyone. Instead, I stared at the white bandaging on his forearm where the dog had bitten him. My mother, babbling on, must have noticed it, too. "We'll be very, very glad when we hear from the state about the rabies test," she told him at a rate of ten words per second. "We're certainly hoping it's negative. I'm sure you're anxious, too."

He kept those steady brown eyes of his on her, and he nodded, giving her a kind of all-purpose acknowledgment, saying nothing even though

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we both could have told her to stop worrying. The dog wasn't rabid. Just Devil-possessed.

"Deil," I said without knowing I was going to say it, "what happened to your hand?"

He pulled it away from mine, but faced me as if I had a right to ask. "My father put it in the fire." His voice was gritty and soft.

"In the — in what fire?"

"Flame on a gas stove."

"On purpose?"

"Yes. To punish me."

I didn't know what to say. Gasps and murmurs sounded from the girls standing along the wall. "Nice guy!" one of them exclaimed.

Deil turned. "You people get fathers," he said to them, "I get the fiend from Hell." He kept his voice down, but his eyes had gone hot, like tan sparks, from talking about it.

They were sympathetic, interested now that I had gotten it going, coming closer to sit down and cluster around and ask him more questions. His misshapen feet? Yes, his father had done that. His earliest memory was of having his foot stomped, all the little bones broken, for running around and being a nuisance. The scars on his face? Yes, from beatings. On the left side, from his father's right fist. On the right side, from falling against things. His nose, broken many times? Yes, his father again. He hoped to have it fixed someday, that and the hand. Where was his father now? He didn't know for sure. Could be anywhere.

"In jail, I hope." My mother was shocked to her limit. Horrified.

"I hope he's *dead*," said Jenna, the senior girl who had brought everybody there in her car. "I hope he met somebody bigger and meaner than him and got killed. Hurt worse than he hurt you and then killed."

"He's not dead. There's nobody bigger or meaner." Deil sounded almost proud, yet afire with rage. He was looking down at his hands, at the way the mutilated one lay curled like a hurt animal in his lap, and I knew he didn't want to talk anymore, and I felt to blame for starting this.

Mom, bless her pointy head and her hostess instincts, jumped up and started taking orders for soft drinks. Not that she was coming to Deil's rescue — I knew better. Mom wasn't a rescuing sort of person. More of a walled fort, safe if you got inside her, but entitled to shut you out. Or a palace of proprieties. If somebody got beat up in front of her, she would prob-

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ably think that public bleeding was in bad taste. Anyway, most likely she had decided she didn't want any more talk in her house about awful things. So we had colas and snack mix, and then the girls gave me the get-well gifts they had brought me, silly little useless teddy bears and pinkie rings and puffy stickers and things.

Deil hadn't moved from where he was sitting right beside me, and after a while he looked up at me with eyes like brown mountain lakes, whispering, "I didn't bring you anything."

I didn't have words to tell him that just having him there beside me was making me sky-high, sea-deep, Lord God happy. All I could do was look back at him, at those eyes gazing out deep and shadowed from his rugged face, and then there is a blurred time, and then they were all saying, "See ya, Angel," and getting up to leave. Deil went out the door with the others, and I looked out the window to watch them go, and Mom sighed like a horse and carried a tray of glasses to the kitchen.

Then, through the window, I saw Deil speak to Jenna and run back to the door.

He darted in and slid to his knees beside me, panting a little, though I don't think it was from running. His panting roughened his voice when he said, "Hold out your hand."

"Deil —"

"Angel, do it, please."

I held out my hand, palm up, and he stared at me with his honey-brown eyes and blinked once, hard, as if life was hard. And a warm jewel lay there shining in the cup of my hand, a teardrop gemstone red as blood.

"That's my heart," he whispered to me, and he got up and ran out, limping.

It's hard to explain the way I loved him. I had heard about sex — in fact, I thought about sex a lot, I hoped to do it someday with somebody I loved — yet I had no thoughts of ever doing anything with Deil except touching his hand and his wild, wild hair, looking into his wonderful eyes, maybe hugging his hard, scarred body sometime when he needed comforting. What I felt for him was an exaltation, a holy passion, an adoration of my soul for his soul that sang defiantly on a mountaintop made of renegade dreams.

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I am made of danger,
I darken your road,
strong one who runs
with her gaze on the hilltops
But more than you know
hilltop Angel, you need me,
so trust me a moment,
hide in my darkness,
take hold of my hand.
I cast a long shadow,
you shine in the sun.
Stand by me
and we will be
a completion.

This is one of the songs his soul sang to mine that first day when I looked into his eyes.

He really was a singer, I knew that now. He had not yet told me, but my parents, who felt that he must be paid off somehow, had called the Juvenile Home and asked the chaplain what might be an appropriate gift for him. She told them Deil was the lead vocalist for a band some of the boys had gotten together. If my parents provided funds for new amps, she suggested, Deil would surely be delighted.

This was arranged. But apparently, Deil did not consider himself dispensed with. He came to see me again the next day, riding out to my house barefoot on the bike Coach kept at school for him, and I could tell that my mother was not pleased, because she made him come into the formal front room, where he would be sure to feel uncomfortable under the crystal chandelier, the Austrian-style crushed-velvet valances, the gilt moldings, the ten-foot Art Nouveau mirror glittering over the fireplace.

He stopped in the doorway, staring. "You let ugly people in here?" he inquired.

Not usually. "You're not ugly, Deil," I told him, which was true. He was beautiful to me, the way a battered ancient god is beautiful to a believer.

He looked at my mother and said, "You did all this?" and I saw her soften a little because he understood: the house was her artwork, her self, the world she had built to shelter her family, and no, she did not like to let

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anything ugly into it, or into our lives.

She made him sit on a chair by himself, rather than on a love seat by me, and she sat down across the room from him and played Twenty Questions.

"Where are you from, Deil?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know? Where were you born?"

"I don't know." He was giving her his wide, sweet smile, but not to charm her — there was nothing in him that tried to con other people. Really, he was smiling at the joke of himself, knowing what a wacko thing he was for her to find sitting in her parlor. "My people traveled with the migrants, the Gypsies, the carnivals sometimes," he said. "I'm from everywhere."

"But your birth certificate — "

"I don't have one. Nobody can find it. I never had a birthday, I don't know when I was born, what year, even. I'm not sure how old I am."

I could have told her all this. Since looking into his eyes, I knew things about him. I knew he didn't have a Social Security number, proper medical records, or a dental chart, and I knew he hadn't been counted in the census. I knew his mother was dead. I knew his father went by many names. I knew he was not likely ever to matriculate at one of the better colleges. It was part of Deil that he should come from nowhere and still be nowhere, that by most people's terms he should barely exist.

"But that's terrible," said my mother, meaning it.

I knew also that he could pick pockets, handle snakes, juggle knives and hurl them with accuracy. I knew he didn't sleep much, but preferred to walk out in the night in his bare, tough feet and sing to the moon and stars. I wondered what he had seen in my soul, what he knew of me that made him love me, but I could not imagine.

"How have you lived?" she asked him.

I knew there were only a few things a kid could do to survive on his own: steal, beg, peddle drugs, sell his own body. I knew Deil had done them all, and they had scarred his soul as badly as his father had scarred his face. I knew he was remembering how they had nearly killed him. I knew my mother was not imagining, could not imagine, how he had lived, and I hoped he would not tell her.

He shrugged off the memories and said, "So I have spent most of my life

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in Hell. Things are better now. I have food, clothes, a safe place to sleep, someone who cares about me."

He did not turn his head to look at me, but I knew: he meant me. Mother knew, too. After he was gone, she came to me with a very worried look and told me, "Angel, don't get too serious about him."

"Why?" Even though he had not appeared to mind it, I was angry at the way she had interrogated him, and I shouted at her, "Because you don't like his hair? Because his parents don't belong to the Country Club? Because his skin is dark?"

It surprised me that she did not shout back at me. She stayed quiet and worried, and she said, "Because you're too young."

"I'm sixteen!"

"Yes, and Deil is maybe eighteen going on — God knows. God knows where he's been and what he's done, to be able to kill an animal that way." Three days ago he was a rescuing savior. Now he was a brute. Mom said, "Angel, you're my only child. I don't want you to get hurt."

"It's not like that," I told her. "Trust me a little."

"It's not you I don't trust."

"Deil would never — "

"How can you tell for sure? Angel, when a person's been treated the way Deil was — don't you see? He'll become what he's been taught to be, he'll end up just like his father. Maybe he seems like a lost puppy now, but all that violence, beaten into him — it has to come out sometime. All that hate — he won't care who he hurts. He's bad things waiting to happen. Angel, I want you to stay away from him."

"No," I said. "No, you don't understand. You don't even know him." To get away from her, I hobbled up to my room, where, in a velvet-lined treasure box under the mirror, I kept a stone so deeply red it seemed alive. I opened the box and looked at it for a long time, and touched its warmth with my hand because I knew Deil would feel my touch in his heart.

BY THE time I got back to school, Deil had mostly stopped being a hero, he was just Damnbanna again to the kids, but a lot of them were starting to like him because of the wry look he got in his eyes when the adults praised him. *Sure,* that look said, *you love me now, but where were you when I was hustling on the streets? If I'd knocked on your door, would you have let me in? You're hypocrites. You*

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don't really know me, and you don't want to. It was the way all kids felt about adults, but it went double for Deil. He didn't know his own last name, but he knew to his bones where he'd been, and he wasn't ever going to forget it, no matter how much the snakes smiled now.

Even some of the upper-class kids were starting to talk with him, and the preps, and the bookheads. Most kids except the jocks, like Heath. That didn't stop a lot of them from laughing at me for meeting his bus in the morning and waiting to sit with him at lunchtime and hanging around his locker in the afternoon. But I didn't care. I didn't mind letting the world know I was in love with him.

Nothing else in my life was going right. I couldn't finish cross-country season because of my leg. I had to go around with bright red dog-bite marks on my face, and the doctors said they might never completely fade. I was behind in all my subjects. My parents were being a huge pain, worrying about me and my leg, me and my face, me and Deil. What they should have worried about, they didn't know, because I didn't tell them: it was time for me to go on the road in Driver's Ed, with Old Goat McCready.

There's one in every school: a teacher who has been there longer than the asbestos in the ceiling, years and years, until he's almost ready for retirement, so they just let him stay even though he's useless. Only, Mr. McCready was worse than useless — he was dangerous. No joke. I mean, to a lot of people, he was a big joke, but not to me. People thought he was funny because he wore two-tone plastic shoes and sucked in his gut a lot and used Grecian Formula, and if you were female, he hit on you. They said he'd paw at anything with doorknobs or a mailbox. The older girls laughed about him in the locker room, but I wasn't laughing when I followed him to the car. To me, he was sick.

And sickening. And I'd just have to handle it, I thought. Worse than useless, just plain dangerous. But I had no idea really how dangerous.

The minute we were in the car, he started in on me. "O.K., now just relax, sweetie." The Driver's Ed cars are automatic, nothing could be simpler, but he still had to plop his hand on top of mine to show me how to shift into gear. By the time we were out of the parking lot, he had scooted over next to me. "Love your perfume, baby doll," he said, even though I never wear any. "O.K., now don't be afraid of it, honeybun. I wanta see you make it go. Push it, push it, make it go fast, honey." He looked happy and started to pant and put his hand on my knee like he was going

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to work the accelerator that way.

We were out in the country, with nobody around to see him or help me, and I felt panicky enough to puke. A lot of the girls said to just ignore him, he was a harmless old asshole who got his jollies from pawing you, then gave you a good grade whether you earned it or not. But I couldn't just ignore him. There's something about me: when the radio plays a love song, I have to listen, and McCready was like a love song speeded up and played backward — all wrong, but it had a power over me. What he was trying to do to me — it mattered, it could change me forever. If I let him keep mauling me, I would lose something I could never get back.

"Mr. McCready," I tried, "please get over on your own side."

"Now, don't you go telling me how to teach, sugar." He shoved himself harder against me. I edged away from him, letting the car slow down while my thoughts speeded up. "Faster, cupcake," Mr. McCready coaxed, and he put his arm around me, leaning against me. He had me cornered against the door, damn him. There was no place to go.

Except out. I didn't even have to decide, I just did it. I stamped the brake pedal down hard, and elbowed McCready — that and the way I'd sent him into the dashboard mostly unstuck him from me. I opened the door before the car was really stopped, swung myself out, and ran. McCready shouted something, and I felt him grab at my arm, but I tore loose from him and sprinted away. God, it felt good to be running again, in control. It made me feel like a real person, the way being with Deil made me feel real. Running in the wind blew all the anger and nausea away. So my leg hurt, so what. I settled into a lope. It was only a few miles back to school, and even with a sore leg I knew I could make it.

After a minute, though, I heard the car roaring like a pack of wolves behind me, coming closer. McCready had got it turned around and was heading after me.

I didn't want to get back in there with him, but I did have to consider the possibility. I knew he would report me for running away from him, and I've never in my life been any good at being in trouble. Seems like I always need to be a good girl. So I stood still and turned to look at him, hoping maybe he'd be a good boy, too, and apologize, and I could get back in the car, and he'd let me alone — whoa, forget being let alone. The car bore down on me fast, with him behind the wheel shouting, Bitch, Slut, I'm not sure what, his lips stretched back from his teeth, and the red glare in his

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eyes — I knew that look, I knew the spirit snarling out of his eyes, I'd seen it once before and had nearly died.

Now I was running for my life instead of for the joy of it. He sideswiped me, sent me stumbling off the shoulder of the road into the ditch and up against a barbed-wire fence. The air filled with the smell of black rubber — he screamed on past, he was doing a 180, ready to have another try at me. And I was struggling with the fence — it was new and tight, meant to keep cows in and hunters out, not meant for anybody to get through, but I had to, so I climbed through it anyway — I felt the barbs tear my shirt and rake across my back, leaving a row of welts. Then I ran for the rocky, wooded hills where maybe he wouldn't find me. Scared enough to pour on a finish-line kick like I'd never done before, hurt leg or not. I was afraid he would crash the car right through the fence and come after me before I reached the rougher ground where he couldn't follow. But he didn't. I guess he'd calmed down and started to plan.

I got to the rimrock, out of sight of the road, and then I felt so shaky and my leg ached so bad I had to sit down. For a while I just sat there and shivered and felt sick while part of my mind looked over my options. When I got up, I wasn't heading back toward the school anymore. I just wanted to go home.

Which was miles away, and it was slow going. I was cutting across fields, afraid to use the roads because McCready might be still out there —and nothing looked familiar, I wasn't really sure of my direction, and dark was coming earlier every day, and my leg hurt. Lord, my leg hurt. The more I walked, the more I knew I was lame and not going to make it on my own.

It was Deil who found me. He knew somehow that I was in trouble, he walked out of class the minute it started and rode his bike to where I was — he could feel that, too, where to find me. It was like there were soul signals flying in the air between us. He got there fast, in time to see McCready doing about eighty in the opposite direction. But then he had to intercept me, and I could go a lot faster than he could on foot. He had to figure out a way to get close to me using his bike. So it took him awhile to catch up to me.

When I saw him limping toward me along a cow trail, I ran up to him and hid in his embrace with my head on his shoulder. I stood there for a long time, soaking up the good feeling of his arms around me, his hands

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comforting the cuts on my back. "I saw it again," I said into the warmth of his hair. "It came after me again."

He knew exactly what I meant. I felt him swallow. There was a long silence, and then he said in a low, shadowed voice, "He's going to keep coming after you. He wants you badly, because you are one of the few pure, true ones left. But you are strong, you will not let him have you. And I am here."

I whispered. "He can't have you either, Deil."

"He has had me already. He chewed me up and spit me out. But I survived. And now I say he cannot have you."

My parents came through for me, which was more than I had expected from them. They weren't pleased to see Deil bringing me home on his bike, but after I told them what had happened, once they were sure I wasn't exaggerating and they understood what sort of teacher McCready was, they got on the phone to the superintendent of schools and threatened to call the police. My parents were old, in their forties, when they had me, which made them stricter than other parents. Or maybe it was because I was their one-shot only child that they breathed down my neck so much and watched my every move. Which usually made me feel like busting loose — I wanted to talk back, walk out, run wild in the streets, and I never did — but this time, for once, I was glad they were the way they were. They would do whatever it took to see that McCready never laid a hand on me again.

I told them everything except that I had seen the black-dog spirit glare out of McCready's face. That, I couldn't tell them. My father was a nuclear physicist; science was his life. My mother had once managed the government office where they met; she expected things to behave, follow the rules, sit still in the place where she put them and be the same when she came back. No way could either of them understand what I was up against. Only Deil understood.

I went back to school the next day, because my parents had screamed hard enough to the people in charge. But Deil had nobody to scream for him, so he was suspended for three days. I missed him, and was frightened the whole time because Mr. McCready was still hanging around the school. He had told the administration I was overreacting, all he had done was try to calm me down and I had nearly wrecked the car bailing out,

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then all he had done was pull up beside me and I thought it was some sort of TV-show-bad-guy stuff, I was a spoiled brat making a mountain out of a molehill. The principal had pulled him out of Driver's Ed, but was letting him draw pay and do busywork around the office until the school board decided whether to fire him. I think he found out where my locker was, and made sure he walked through that hallway a lot, because I saw him every day, and the way he looked at me made me feel deathly cold.

Somehow Deil managed to call me every night even though he was supposed to be grounded and not allowed to use the phone. It was wonderful to hear his voice, it warmed me like a fire in the dark. But my parents never let me talk with him for long.

His first day back in school, he was a hero again because of being suspended, and because a lot of the girls were rooting for me against McCready, and for Deil and me against the world. The cross-country girls especially were starting to like him as a friend. All of which irritated the football jocks, who were used to having the hero halo all to themselves. At least that's my guess. Whatever started it, when I went out to meet Deil at the bus dock that afternoon, he was facing off with Heath Whipperman again, and his eyes were like tan fire.

"Listen, Damnbanna boy," Heath was saying, "I don't want to hurt you, not really. I mean, it's been done so often before, it'd be like screwing an old woman all stretched out of shape. You been just about used up."

Deil didn't answer except to shift his weight a little and flex his fists. I agreed with him, Heath wasn't worth talking to. But I wanted so bad —what a stupid world it is. I wanted to stand by the side of the one I love, and fight his enemies with him, but I couldn't. Girls are the same as anybody else, they feel that call to courage, they want to wear a badge of loyalty, they want to stand tall, they're willing to give what it takes to save a friend. But I had to stay back and watch, because I knew it doesn't do a boy any good to have a girl stand up for him. They'd mock him to hell if I did anything to help him.

"On the other hand," Heath was saying, "maybe you wouldn't mind."

Of course, Heath had his jock flock with him, half a dozen of them, and of course they grinned to assure him that he was being tremendously clever.

"Like your mother," he said. "Hey, Damnbanna, was your ma acquainted with your — "

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Deil hit him so hard and fast that Heath slammed into the concrete while the words were still coming out. Then it was all fists and too many punch-pumping shoulders and kids yelling, "Fight! Fight!" like a bunch of vultures. I wasn't yelling anything, but I could feel Deil's fury hot in my own heart. He had spent most of his life on the streets, he knew how to use his feet, his head, his teeth, he fought like black-leather fire, and Heath was only the first one to get burned. Deil swung the next guy into the school's brick wall hard enough to put him out of action. But then he was up against the wall himself, taking three punches while he landed one — he couldn't fight all of them at once. A couple of the cross-country jocks ran over and got into it on his side, thank God, pulling some of those buttheads off him. And Deil was still on his feet and scorching mad and lashing out like flame.

But the U-Haul look-alike was so big nobody could stop him. He just bulled his way through everything. "Damnbanna," he hollered, "I got the damnbanna." And he pulled it off Deil's head.

Something pulsed almost like neon, flushed red as the raw new scrape marks on Deil's face. In the middle of his forehead, where the cotton cloth had hidden it, was a scar worse than any of the others, a brand that would never fade.

It was so awful that everything just stopped. Everyone backed away from him, even the cross-country boys. He stood alone in the middle of a circle of stares.

And I was gawking, too. I couldn't seem to catch my breath or move or speak. That fiery mark — I knew better than anyone else what it meant. But then I remembered a day when he had whispered to me, "Look into my eyes. Don't look at anything else." And I shifted my stare and moved. His eyes were wild as a spooked colt's and not meeting mine, but I kept moving. I went to him past all those bodies rigid with staring, walked up to him and said as if nothing much had happened. "C'mon, Deil. We're gonna miss the bus."

He came with me, and as we passed the oversized jock who held his bandanna, Deil took it back with two fingers like he was lifting it off a wooden hanger. He put it on, and we walked away together.

Actually, he had already missed his bus. I took him on mine, I took him home, and all the way there, he sat beside me stony-faced, not saying a word.

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My mother wasn't home, which was bad. I was going to be in trouble for having him in the house alone with me. It seemed like I was always in trouble since I'd met him, yet I wasn't getting any better at standing up to my parents than I'd ever been. So what else was new. I brought Deil into the kitchen, made him sit at the table, and ran to get the first-aid kit from the master bedroom. His lip was split, and one side of his face was still bleeding from being knocked against brick. I bent over him, cleaning it with antiseptic cream on a piece of sterile cotton. He shook his head as if he felt a fly pestering him.

"Hold still," I told him.

He said thickly, "Hardly seems worth the bother."

"You're hurt," I said. "Bleeding." I didn't care how often it had happened before, when he got hurt, somebody should take care of him.

He held still, but his voice shook when he said, "Damn them. Damn them to hell."

Ice for his lip, I was thinking.

"They can say anything they want about me, but God help them if they say things about my mother."

The last word broke apart. I forgot about the ice, dropped my cotton, and put my arms around him. He laid his head on my shoulder. I felt wet lashes blink against my neck.

After a moment he said, more softly, "I don't mean damn them, not really." My collar blurred his voice. "I wouldn't do that."

I told him, "I know."

"Do you? Really?"

"I think so."

He sat up and pulled away from me so that he faced me. "Angel. Are you sure you understand about me?"

I believed I did, but I didn't want to say what I was thinking. The words weren't right, they would sound like blame, condemnation, even though to me the only stigma on him was that of a savior. I just gazed back at him.

"Take another look," he said, and he pulled the strip of bright swaddling cloth off his head. I felt love of him hurt my heart, it was an act of such defiance and surrender. People with hard fists could not threaten him into doing it, but he would do it on his own, for me.

Silent, he faced me, waiting.

The brand had darkened to red-brown, less flushed but no less hideous:

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a crude letter *D* burned deep into his flesh. Others would think it was a self-mutilation, *D* for Deil, but I knew better. I saw the clouds of scarring all around it from his attempts to blot it out. I had seen into his eyes. And I was acquainted with the black dog.

"Your father's mark," I said.

"Yes." He was not surprised that I knew.

I got him the ice for his bruised lip then. He pressed it to his mouth as he talked.

He said, "He held me down and used a woodburning tool to put it on me. I was only about two, three years old, but I remember." His voice struggled with the memories. "I fought him harder than he expected, I made his hand slip." There was a horn on the corner of the *D*. "He got angry and burned it deeper and deeper until I passed out from the pain."

There was anger for Deil's sake burning a deep brand on my heart. I couldn't speak.

He laid down the ice and looked far away, remembering. He said softly, "After it healed, my mother made me headbands to hide it, a whole lot of them. "His hands clenched, lying on the table. He said, "When I ran away —I was maybe ten years old. My father was coming at me with a monkey wrench, and I tripped him so he fell and the wrench went flying, and then I hit him on the back of the head with it, I knocked him out. When he came to, he would kill me, I was sure of it. I ran straight out the door, there wasn't time to grab anything that belonged to her, a picture of her, anything. All I have to remember her by is the headband I was wearing that day."

I took his dark-haired head in my hands and kissed the wound over his eyes. It was the first time I had kissed him.

He shivered at my touch, and I heard his breath catch. Then he sat very still, staring up at me, and whispered, "She used to do that, too."

I thought she might have.

"Christ, I wish something would make it just go away."

I sat down facing him and said, "The only way that could happen is if your father had never lived."

"I know. "He swallowed hard. "I hate him now, but — when I was little, I used to be in awe of him. He was so big, so powerful, so full of visions, so clever in the ways he he was cruel. I thought — if he tortured me enough, maybe I would be worthy, maybe he would — smile. I wanted him to smile

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on me. I wanted him to — to love me."

"He can't love anybody."

"I know that now."

"You knew it when you ran away."

"Yes." He was silent for a minute, fumbling with his headband, fastening it on again to cover his father's mark. When he spoke again, it was part manifesto, part vow. He said, "I defy the way he has branded me. I deny anything that is expected of the Devil's son. I go against him in any way I can. I live for rebellion."

THE DEVIL'S son in rebellion — what did that make him? A rescuing angel? But the Devil himself was a rebel angel, a renegade kicked out of Heaven.

Like I wished I could be. But I didn't have the guts.

"*What* is this?" That was my mother's reaction when she came in, like Deil was something dirty I had dragged into her nice, clean, safe haven of a house. We were sitting holding hands and listening to music — rock ballads, steely and tender, like he was — and all I could do was tighten my fingers on his. I couldn't tell her to shut up. I couldn't tell her she was a bitch. I just didn't have it in me.

"*Angel.* What is Deil doing here?"

Living, I thought. *Breathing. Hurting. Loving. All the usual human things.* But what I actually said, like a child, was, "Nothing."

"I missed my bus," Deil said quietly. Mom ignored him and glared at me.

"Angel, I want an explanation."

After a while we did manage to make her understand what had happened, and she condescended to take Deil home, but I was not allowed to ride along. When she got back, she told me I was never, not ever, to see him outside of school again, and I just stood there and took it. I could sneak. In fact, I knew I would sneak. But something in me would never let me raise my clenched fist and shout at her and walk out the door. I was a prisoner in her heaven. I couldn't fight back.

That night was the school board meeting. Both my parents went, along with about thirty of their friends, for the purpose of getting McCready fired. And there were even a few parents of other girls there, people who

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didn't know us, who came anyway to show support. And I was there, in case the board wanted to ask me any questions. And McCready was there with his hair greased back, standing against the wall on the far side of the room and not looking at me.

Deil was not there; how could he be? But I could feel him thinking of me. I had brought his heart along with me for courage, hiding it deep in my skirt pocket or else holding it in my closed hand, feeling it wait warmly throbbing in the hollow of my palm.

Things started quietly enough. The reading of the minutes, et cetera. The board members, older people, held their mouths in tight smiles when they weren't talking. I think they didn't really like having a crowd show up for their meeting. They kept everyone waiting to show the world who was in charge, like they were saying a gang of parents couldn't necessarily tell them what to do.

When they finally called on Daddy, he stood up to talk, and you better believe people listened. My father is big, and keeps himself fit, and he's usually in a gray Paul Stuart suit, and he's courteous and quiet most of the time, but when he says something, every word clicks into place like a bolt in a door lock. As he talked, I watched the faces up front change from polite to intent. He presented his case as a matter of propriety and principle, Mr. McCready as no gentleman, me as a nothing-special young woman who was trying to do the right thing. If there was any outrage in the soft words he spoke, it was because the right order of things had been violated, not because I had.

Another man got up to speak, a bib-fronted farmer, and every word from him slopped over with emotion. His poor little daughter, victimized by a dirty old man. And I sat there thinking, *I'm glad I'm not anybody's poor little daughter.* But I wasn't sure I wanted to be a nothing-special do-gooder, either. I thought about Deil, whose father was immense and fiery and powerful but no more loving than a cattle prod. And I thought, *They talk about kids not knowing right from wrong. They talk about drugs, bad attitudes, juvenile delinquents. But if there is evil in this school, it has to do with the adults. Something about the adults.*

McCready came forward to defend himself, wearing a smile the way he wore his polyester pants, as part of the uniform that was going to save him. He reminded the board members that he didn't have to remind them about his thirty years of service. If he was such a terrible person, why

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hadn't anybody complained before? He himself was at a loss to explain this sudden witch-hunt. The only thing he could conclude was that the well-meaning people at this meeting were helpless in the grip of hysteria fueled by a troubled and possibly PMS'ing young girl — he meant me. He looked at me, his face approximating an expression of pity and goodwill. He was no expert, he said, unless his years of experience with children made him an expert, but in his opinion, for what it was worth, I was an unusually rigid and tense child. Apparently, I had mistaken his friendly efforts to relax me as something dirty and indecent. It was a shame such ideas had ever been put into my young head, but these obsessions were characteristic of children raised by nervous, overprotective parents who did not allow normal social growth and maturation.

"The Devil can quote scripture," said my father in his quiet way, just as I was thinking, *You're right about the nervous parents.* My father's deadbolt voice wanted to keep me locked in my mother's palace prison, the place where no one could touch me.

McCready was still looking at me, very much in control, trying to make me shout or cry or glare or do something he could interpret to the board as emotionally unstable. I was mostly looking down at my hands. Probably that was a sign of being overprotected. "I take offense at name-calling," McCready was saying with martyred calm. "I haven't been convicted of any crime. Nobody's got any right to associate me with the Devil."

I looked straight at him, and the black dog was grinning back at me, leering out of his eyes.

Probably I should have trusted the school board to see through him or at least to decide on the safe side. Probably I shouldn't have done what I did then. But I was furious, I wanted like hell for the others to see him the way I did, and some sort of weird prompting told me how to make it happen. I lifted my hand and uncurled it just a little to show him the red, red stone nestling in my palm. I gave the black dog a glimpse of his rebel son.

It worked well enough to make me wish I hadn't ever thought of it.

McCready flinched back, and his lips pulled away from his teeth till his gums showed, and he glared at me. His voice turned high and sharp. "What you looking at me for?" he barked. "You little bitch, I know your kind. Look at the clothes you wear. Short skirts, tight jeans. What do you

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expect? Who do you think you are? Tight-ass prick tease. Leading me on like that, then yelling rape, you lying slut, you asked for it. Trying to make trouble for me. Stuck-up piece of tail. One of these days, you're gonna get what you deserve, girl, I'll see to that."

My father was on his feet with Mom hanging on his arm to hold him back, and the chair of the school board was shouting at McCready, trying to shut him up, but he wouldn't shut up. He just kept going, showing off his vocabulary in a different way than earlier. Everybody in the place was either in an uproar or in shock. Don't you love that word, *shock*, like all the circuit breakers got blown. It pretty much describes the way I was just sitting there, my hand stuck deep in my pocket.

"Call security," some man on the school board was yelling at one of the women, as though only a woman could dial a phone. "He's making threats."

"I'll threaten her all I like," McCready said without turning around. "I'll do more than threaten her. They're no-good whores, all of them. She's gonna hear from me." He stalked out.

There was talk about police, psychiatric evaluation, permanent sick leave. We didn't stay for it. My parents figured their point was made, and they saw me shaking. They took me home.

That was a rough weekend. Even in the daytime, I imagined something moving behind every bush. The nights were full of black dogs in the shadows, or snarling men in black cars, and the only person who could have helped me was not allowed in my house — I wouldn't see him until Monday morning. I kept the red stone with me all the time, but I didn't sleep much.

In one of my restless dreams, Deil's mother came to me.

I knew right away who it was, but I don't know how I knew. Except that she was dark, she didn't look that much like him. More like a starved wolf. She was a big-eyed, thin woman with a hungry, hard shadow under her jaw — not somebody my mother would let in her house. She wore tight ripped jeans and a black halter top. Bare shoulders, even though it was cold. She had to keep them bare, I guess, because riding on them, all tangled in her long, dark hair, was a huge pair of pearly white wings.

Without opening the door, there she was in my bedroom, pulling out my desk chair to sit on. The wings got in the way of everything she tried to

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do, and I saw a smoldering look in her eyes as she arranged them over the back of the chair, but she didn't say anything.

"Hi, Mrs. Damnbanna," I greeted her. It was a dream, so nothing seemed strange, and it didn't seem wrong that I was calling her by that name.

Not looking at me, she gazed around the way Deil sometimes did — or used to do — in my house, gawking. Without saying hi, she asked me, "You got a cigarette?"

"No. Sorry."

"Can't have everything." She looked straight at me for the first time. "You really love him?"

"Of course I do."

"No 'of course' about it. Don't seem real likely, a rich brat like you."

Something about the way she called me a rich brat made me realize she was not that much older than I was. I had been thinking of her as a mother, about my mother's age, and in the dim light it was hard to tell how old she was from her hollow-cheeked, hard-edged face. But now I realized — she had been very young when she had him, and almost as young when she died. Talking to her about Deil was going to be like talking to a tough dropout girl about a boy we both wanted.

"I'm not a rich brat," I said. "Do you love him?"

I was dreaming, so nothing surprised me, but my nerve surprised her enough to make her grin. Then, for the first time, I saw the resemblance. She had his wide, sweet, smart-ass smile. And scars like his. I could see the scars toughening her face now.

She took her time answering. "I don't know," she said finally. "What the hell is love, anyway? Nobody ever told me. But I could've done better for him, that's for sure. I should've got him and me away from that Devil."

"Why didn't you?"

She shook her head and never had any intention of answering. "You see these wings?" she said.

Of course I saw them, who could miss them? "Yes."

"I never earned them. I was just an ordinary sort of slut, no sense or spine when it come to men. But the way Deil remembers me, he's put them on me." She wore them, I sensed, the way my mother had always worn the crepe-paper lapel posies I made for her in nursery school: proud but looking forward to a time when this phase would be over. My mother preferred a fresh hothouse corsage on her linen suit. Deil's mother would

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probably have liked black leather bat wings to go with her biker-chick look.

"The Devil," I persisted. "Why did you stay with him?"

She lifted her head a notch, tossing her hair. "He had his good points, you know," she said defensively. That sounded like a contradiction in terms to me, and my face must have showed it, because she shrilled, "Yes, he did! Really. He was a great talker when he felt like it. He said the most unusual things, it was shivery to listen to him. And he was kinky in bed. And it was good sometimes that he was cruel. The Devil ain't just for tempting people and making bad things happen. Sometimes the Devil is for punishing people who deserve it."

"Deil didn't deserve it," I said.

"No, that's true." Her chin drooped again, and she looked away from me, glancing around the room for a cigarette even though she knew there weren't any. I could tell by the way she gestured that she would have felt more comfortable with a cigarette in her hand. Or else she did not want to meet my eyes. "Deil was an innocent child," she said softly. "But you see, his daddy needed to raise him right. Make him another one just like the other ones. See, evil like that is made, not born."

I could stand listening to this only because nothing matters too much in dreams. And even though I was sitting up in bed talking to her, I knew it had to be a dream, because there she was with those ridiculous wings.

"Well," I said, "his daddy didn't get what he wanted."

"No, he didn't. And I'm glad, now that I'm dead and don't have to please the old bastard no more."

I nodded like a guy sitting at a bar with another guy, sleepy and mellow, starting to like her even though she was my rival. "Do you ever get to see Deil?"

"Almost every night."

"Like this? In his dreams?"

"That's right, sweetie pie. These days I gotta wait in line, though, behind you." She gave me a wicked grin. "Hoo, girl, you should see the wings you get to wear."

I didn't like her tone, or the thought of me in wings, and the combination woke me up enough to make me rude. "So why are you here, anyway? What do you want?"

"Just trying to take care of him better than I did when I was alive." She

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stood up, and her wings dragged against the back of her chair, knocking it over. "Jesus jumpin' on the water!" she snapped — she didn't mind swearing now that she saw I was harmless, and she kept the edge in her voice when she turned to me. "I just wanted to tell you, girl, you do anything to hurt him, anything at all, and you'll have me to reckon with." She swung her dark hair like a whip and lifted her wings so that the feathers rustled and made me think of storm wind rising. "I mean it. He been hurt enough."

"You don't have to tell me that."

"Huh. We'll see." She turned to leave.

"Wait," I said to her. "Why is the black dog trying to get me?"

"Don't he try to get everybody?"

"Does he?"

"You especially, maybe, because you're such a milk-drinking virgin." She shrugged, dismissing me — the movement lifted her wings almost to the ceiling, and they spread across my room, hiding my world, turning my night white. "You just remember what I told you," she said, and then she was gone, I'm not sure how. The same way she came, probably. Which is to say that I lay back against my pillows, or rolled over, and whatever was next in line came onstage. Only a dream.

In the morning, though, when I got up, my desk chair was lying on its side in the middle of the room.

IT WAS Monday morning, thank God. I never used to think I'd ever look forward to Monday and school, but it was worth it to see Deil.

When he got off his bus that day, though, kids got quiet and backed away a few steps, remembering the fight and the dark red mark on his forehead.

"Deil." I was just glad we had a few minutes together before the opening bell. He was wearing a blue bandanna today, and his eyes looked sad. We walked down the sidewalk, away from everybody.

"Face O.K.?" I asked him. It still showed some scrapes and bruises.

"About half."

"Which half?"

That made him smile. I loved to make him smile, because the sweetness of his smiling mouth made his whole scarred face beautiful. Though it was always beautiful to me.

I said, "Deil, about what happened Friday night —" There hadn't been a

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chance to really talk with him since the school board meeting. My parents didn't give me any privacy when he phoned.

He said, "It's all right."

"No, it's not. I shouldn't have done it." Instinct told me that using the stone against McCready had been a betrayal of Deil. I knew he had felt it.

But he took my hand. He said, "It's all right, Angel. I gave it to you. It doesn't belong to me anymore. It's yours. You can do whatever you want with it."

I shook my head. I said, "I saw your mother last night."

"Did you!" His old-god face was transformed, turned young, by the thought of her. "Isn't she beautiful?"

"Yes." If he was, then she had to be. "She told me if I ever hurt you, she'd rip my lungs out."

"Don't listen to her. You can hurt me."

"But I don't want to. Deil, when I — when McCready saw your heart, did it hurt you?"

"A little. Less than missing you."

That made me ache. Christ, I wanted to hold him — but PDA, public display of affection, was a punishable crime if committed on school property. Adults. Were they all like that, seeing evil in all the wrong things and places, like my mother?

"It's so unfair," I said. She would have let me date bankers' sons who drank, lawyer's sons on drugs, soccer jocks who just wanted to score, almost any boy except the one who really loved me. I told Deil, "I'll find a way. I'll talk to Jenna; maybe she can pick me up, say we're going shopping, and I can meet you somewhere."

He said softly, "Maybe if I talked with your parents."

"Dream on."

"Angel . . . I don't see . . . The thing is, they really care about you. They do. What you've got, a real family. . . ."

His voice faltered away, but looking at him, I understood. It was what he had always wanted, all his life: a real home, a real family like other people had. Family was supposed to make everything right for you. Family was supposed to be love.

And maybe my parents actually did love me. If love can feel like chains. I said to Deil, "The way they care about me is like a prison."

"I know, I can see that. But — I keep thinking, if we can just make them understand. . . ."

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We stopped walking and turned to each other. Really and truly, we were just the same height, Deil and I. When we stood that way, my eyes looked straight into his.

I said, "Deil, I have to break free. I have to. It's not just a nuisance anymore, the way they think they know what is best for me. I'm fighting for my life now."

As if to remind us both, a black car drove up and stopped at the curb. I felt something breathe cold on my spine, and even before I turned to look, I knew: McCready was behind the wheel, watching me.

It was one of those freaky seventy-degree days that come sometimes in December. Mom didn't think a thing when I rushed in after school and told her I was going to get out Cashmir and go for a ride. "Is your leg well enough?" was all she asked.

Cashmir is our backyard Arabian. I guess I am sort of a rich brat, when I think about it.

I hurried getting into jeans and getting saddled up, because I wanted to make time. Once I was out of sight of the house, I put Cashmir into a hard, risky run across the bare fields. Mom wasn't a rider, so she didn't realize how fast and far I could go if I pushed it. It would never occur to her: the Juvenile Home was eight miles away by the roads, but the roads went the long way around. I could make it there cross country on horseback in half an hour.

When I came across the fields to him, Deil was walking barefoot up the tractor path to meet me. They always put those children's-home places way out in the country, supposedly because country life is good for kids in trouble. Really because towns don't want them.

Seeing Deil in this new way, from on top of my golden chestnut mare, I felt glad and shy. "Hey," I said to him.

"Hey yourself, woman." He stood still to look at me on horseback. "You're beautiful."

"Just get up here." I slid my foot out of the stirrup and gave him a hand, which he didn't need, really. He had the grace of a cat in that body of his even though it had been broken so many times. I didn't understand then, but he handled his body the same way he sang, by pressing into the pain, using it, making it part of the pattern of things, part of the beauty.

Western saddles are big. He slipped into it right behind me, with his

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hard, lean thighs pressed against mine, his bare feet hanging down, and he put his arms around me so that his hands hugged me just above my belt buckle. I laid my own hand on his and nudged Cashmir into a walk.

I sent her out into the country. No particular place; we were just being together, Deil and I. The sun warmed us, the saddle rocked us. He snuggled against me, gathering me closer, his chest nestled against my back, his head against mine.

"I love you," I whispered to him.

"Me, too, Angel." His voice was husky. "I love you, too. More than you know."

Cashmir lives to run. She was tired, but when we came to a long, level stretch, she wanted to go, and I let her. She gave us a lope as comfortable as a carousel ride and only a little faster. The wind blew through my hair, my hips rocked with her stride, my heart had gone hot. Something deep and new moved in me. I took Deil's left hand in mine and guided it up to where my breasts were bobbing.

He gasped, and I felt his whole body stiffen, but both his hands lifted to where I wanted them — and God, I wanted, him, him, all of him. I pulled the horse to a halt, leaned back into his arms, laying my head back on his shoulder, in ecstasy. I wanted him to kiss me, really kiss me, and go on from there. I felt his hips tilt, pressing into me, and knew for sure that he wanted me the same way.

He whispered, "No." He cried out, "No!" and pushed himself away from me, his hands shaking. Then he floundered off the horse. Toppled when his bare feet hit the stony ground too hard. Landed on his backside in the dirt. It was the only time I had ever seen him awkward. Sitting there, staring up at me with his face stretched out of shape by horror, he cried, "Angel, run, get out of here!"

I couldn't react except to stare back at him with my lips still expecting his kiss, my body leaning for the warmth where his body had been.

He pounded the earth with his crippled hand, screaming, "Angel, go! Don't you see? It's him! Him trying to get you! Through me!"

"No," I said. "Deil, no. It's not." I looked around, then into his frightened eyes. There was no black-dog spirit anywhere. Only his fear.

"It's just us," I told him. "You and me. Loving each other."

"Angel, please." He calmed down some, seeing, I guess, that nothing was going to hurt me right away. "It — he's in me, he'll make me — please. Go on home. I'll walk back."

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"It's too far."

"I can do it."

"It's still too far. I won't let you. Come on." I offered my hand to him. He shook his head. When I got down off the horse to argue with him, he lurched up and stumbled away from me. It was ten minutes before I could convince him to get back on Cashmir and let me take him home. Then he did it, but he rode on the horse's rump behind the saddle and hung onto its rim. He wouldn't touch me.

I got home before sundown. "Did you have a nice ride?" my mom asked, but I looked through her. I felt dead inside.

The next week was horrible. Everything had gone wrong between Deil and me, and even when he was standing next to me, I felt lost, I couldn't find him. If I reached out my hand to touch him, he pulled away. He didn't mean to hurt me — he was afraid, and hurting as much as I was, I knew that. But knowing it didn't help.

We were like two people dancing on coals of fire. I would come near him and find that I couldn't bear the pain. I would stay away from him and find that I couldn't bear that, either. He would do the same with me, sometimes meeting me at the usual times and places, sometimes not; sometimes I would see him coming, and walk the other way, sometimes I would see him walking away from me. It was hell.

The school was watching, enemies laughing, friends feeling sorry for us. I hated everyone.

Mr. McCready was watching, too. Every day at one time or another I saw him. He drove past my house, past the hockey field when I was out there for gym class, through the parking lot when I was on my way to the dentist, past the school-bus dock. I should have been afraid, I should have told somebody, but I was too miserable to pay much attention. Christmas vacation was coming, and if I didn't get through to Deil somehow before then, those ten days of not seeing him would be the worst in my life. I felt so wretched and desperate, I didn't care about McCready anymore.

I should thank him, actually. The way he was hanging around was what made Deil phone my father.

My father, not me. Deil had mostly stopped phoning me, probably because the silences on the phone line were even worse than the silences between us at school. My parents had caught wind of what was happening,

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and were being very sweet with me. I hated them when I had the energy, but mostly I had gone numb. The parts of me that hurt had gotten tired of it and shut down. I barely noticed one evening midweek when the phone rang and my father took the call in his study. And I didn't react much when he came out and said to me, "Is it true that McCready has been following you?"

"Uh," I said.

"Angel, sit up. Look at me. That was Deil on the phone, and he says McCready is watching you. Is that true?"

"Deil?" Now I was paying attention.

"Dammit, Angel! Have you seen McCready?"

"Yes. Deil called you?"

"Jesus Christ, forget about Deil! *Where* have you seen McCready? *When* have you seen McCready?"

It went on like that for a while, with me intent on one topic and him on the other. My mother wasn't home to enforce her anti-ugliness rules, so he got to swear. My father didn't swear often, but whenever he did, he made up for lost time, then felt awful once he was finished. He swore at me so much during the next half hour that I knew I could make him do almost anything I wanted afterward.

When he was mostly done shouting, I asked him, "Did Deil say anything else?"

"Yes. Jesus Christ, Angel, how could you not tell us about McCready?"

"What?"

"Everything! The man's obviously deranged."

"I mean, what else did Deil say?"

"God have mercy." He rolled his eyes. "Something about his band thanking us for the amps. Angel, you're not taking the bus to school anymore. I don't want you waiting for it out along the road. I'll drive you."

"What about his band?"

"Did you hear me? I said —"

"Yes, I heard! What did Deil say about his band?"

"Angel, I don't remember the exact details; do you mind?" He had calmed down only to the point where he was exasperated with me rather than furious. "You see, next he told me my daughter was being stalked by a psycho, and that occupied my complete attention, to the detriment of my accurate retention of previous data. Can you understand how that might happen?"

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"Just tell me if he mentioned the Christmas dance."

Now he had slipped past exasperation into round-eyed sarcasm. "Why yes," he babbled. "That's exactly what it was. The Christmas dance. At your school."

"Deil will be there?"

"Presumably. The amps will be there. Young love will be there. God will be there. And probably the Devil, too."

"I want to go."

His eyes narrowed to their normal, sane size, and he shook his head.

"Daddy, please. I need to go."

He could see what I meant, I guess, because he got serious and gentle. "Angel, no. I'm sorry, but you can't go anywhere until this McCready thing is settled."

"But I have to! Daddy, look. You come, too. Just come along with me if it's the only way you'll say O.K."

"Well. . . ." He really did care about me, his daughter, and not just the proprieties, I could see that now. He said, "Maybe if I'm right there with you the whole time."

"You will be." Most of me seemed to have come alive again, because now I had hope. I got up and gave him a hug around the neck. I was even able to joke for him. "You will be, because you're all I've got by way of a date."

I DIDN'T GET to dance much. Daddy couldn't handle the beat. Mostly he and I just sat and listened to Dambanna and the Home Boys, who had been required by the adults in charge, adults ever vigilant against evil, to take the first "n" out of their band's name if they wanted to play at the school.

"He's really quite talented," my father said of Deil in surprised tones after a few songs. "He's very good."

I couldn't answer. My heart was aching, and my hand was at my lips, pressing against them a red stone. Every day I looked at it, some days several times, and it still glowed deep and warm as ever. That was some comfort.

"He writes his own material?" Dad marveled. "Some of the lyrics are quite well thought out."

I slipped the stone back into my jeans pocket. "Well, what were you expecting?" I muttered.

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"The usual glowering satanic garbage, I suppose. But he's not like that at all, is he?"

To my eyes, at least, he looked more vulnerable than dangerous, standing barefoot at the mike on a stage decorated in the colors of wistful Christmas, silver and blue. Deil couldn't raise hell and jump around the way most rockers did — his body was too battered and fragile for hours of exertion. He thumped out the beat with his heel and held the mike with his maimed hand, singing with his eyes shut, and nobody — except me —no girl in search of a love object looked at his face. But his songs spoke to my father, and I knew why. Every word was a key trying to turn a huge, heavy lock.

There's a fat white house
On Rich Man Hill
And a skinny kid standing
In the shadow of the mill
And a black dog running
With hunger in his howl.
More white meat on a banker,
But a skinny kid'll do, pal.
Dark meat in the melting pot,
Dark meat in the stew,
Till Heaven sweats and opens up,
Dark meat in the stew.

"He's almost literate," my father remarked.

Of all the frustrating things: now that it was probably too late, Daddy was starting to like Deil. I guess my face must have shown some of what I felt, because he eyed me and said apologetically, "Your mother is generally a good judge of people, Angel."

"She's wrong about Deil."

"I'm willing to admit the possibility."

More than one band was going to play. When Dambanna and the Home Boys finished their set, they came offstage, and my father was on his feet and heading toward Deil, towing me after him by the hand. The guitarists and drummer and keyboard kid all saw me coming, grinned and scattered. Deil stood his ground, scowling to hide his fear.

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"Deil," my father said to him, "um, listen." It was the first time I could remember hearing my father fumbling for words. "I think — I haven't been fair to you."

They looked at each other, and I looked at Deil, and saw his face ease into smoother lines, because, in a small way, one of his dreams was coming true. When he was a kid on the streets of Chicago — he had never told me this, it was one of the things I just knew about him — when he was homeless, on cold winter nights he used to stand in front of the big houses and watch the families that lived in them and dream that if they could just see past his dirty clothes and scarred face, if they just knew him, if he could learn to sing songs that would make them understand, they would let him in.

My father was not used to opening doors, not real steady about it. "Ah," he said, "um, it seems to me I owe you an apology."

"No, you don't," Deil told him. "You were just thinking of Angel."

Coming there that night, I had felt despair sitting on my lap again because I had no clear plan of what to do. All I knew was that I had to get close to Deil somehow. Try to talk with him. Try to make him see that he did not need to be afraid of what he was, that he would not hurt me, that it was not the Devil's fire turning him hot when he was with me, that love also could burn with a heart-red flame.

"It's all right," Deil said to my father. "Forget it." He tried to smile, but it didn't work for him this time. He just looked tired. Then he started to turn away.

"Deil," I requested softly, "dance with me?"

Now my heart felt glad and bold, because I knew exactly what to do. Standing there watching his face as he talked with my father, I had remembered — it felt like remembering, though it was more. And maybe if there is a God, she was with me, because the band was playing slow, honey-sweet oldies. I slipped off my shoes so that we would both be barefoot. Reached out and took his hand.

I felt his reluctance, but of course he could not turn me down. I stood confidently with his hand in mine while he looked at the floor, swallowed hard, looked up again, not at me but at my father, asking for permission —I saw the serious look they gave each other. Deil was to be my protector now, against McCready, against whatever might harm me. My father mumbled something about going to the men's room and walked away.

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We danced. At least, some people would call it dancing. Deil held me at arm's length, moving stiffly to the music, looking anywhere but at me.

I whispered to him, "Deil."

"Angel, please —"

"Deil, look at me."

"No. I don't dare. He's coming, I can feel it."

"He won't get you. I'm stronger than he is. Look at my eyes."

This was what I had realized, a simple thing: that I had to do for him what he had once done for me.

"I won't let him get you. Look into my eyes."

They were words that had the power of magic for the two of us because of that first day. Startled, his mouth softened by surprise, he faced me. His eyes were brown wells made of shadows and fear and tears.

"I won't let anything bad happen to you," I told him gently. I meant it, but what a fool I was, what a young fool, to think I could make that kind of a promise.

"Look into my eyes," I told Deil. "Don't look anywhere else."

In a way, it was completely effortless because it was so fated, and in another way, it was the hardest thing I had ever done, taking him in, offering him the protection of my soul. I was not seeing his face anymore, or even the brown pools that were his eyes. Instead, I was seeing his pain. I saw the huge fist raised to hit him. I saw exactly what had happened to his mother, and trembled, and wanted to cry. I saw the blue flame of the gas stove. I saw his scarred body lying by a roadside, dying.

No. He was not dead, he would never die. That part was wrong.

I closed my eyes and shut it all away, chickening out — but I had been there for him just long enough. The pain was gone, and I felt his arms around me. Holding me, he was holding me very close, and we were dancing so warm, so slow, swaying to the music, and his face lay against mine, wet with tears. Not necessarily his tears.

"No black dog in you anywhere," I whispered against his cheek.

"No. I see now." His voice was choked. "It's — because of my mother. He raped her, beat her to death. I was little, I — watched it happen."

"Yes."

"I didn't understand, I thought — another way of hurting —"

"It is not supposed to be like that."

"Angel — please. Kiss me."

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He offered me his mouth. And I will never forget the sight of his lidded eyes, his wet, scarred cheeks, his parted lips — they were as soft as mine, his lips, despite everything. We kissed, and I felt how utterly he surrendered to me, surrendered his trust, his soul, his frightened body, which pressed against mine. It was a deep kiss, long and hot, yet holy. I wanted to give him more. And that would have been holy, too. But I could not. The dance went on. People all around would not understand. Soon someone would laugh at us, or a teacher would come and be angry, or my father.

The thought made me gently pull my mouth away from his, but the heat of the kiss stayed with me. The whole world felt good, so good. And Deil kept his arms around me, he could not seem to look anywhere now except into my eyes, he was saying, "Angel. Angel. Show me Heaven."

A loud, horrible noise.

The shock of it blasted me and Deil apart. I did not think at first, *Gunfire!* Instead, I thought, *Where am I?* Heaven had turned to a hell of screaming faces and the smell of fear and the void, the dangerous dance-floor emptiness, creating itself around the crazed man with the gun.

Then McCready saw me. That long, pointing weapon of his swung my way. But at the same time, I saw my father charging toward him down the hallway, and out of the side of my eye I saw Deil lunging forward to get between him and me, both of them willing to be killed for me. And I wasn't going to let it happen, I could think only of luring McCready away from them, away from everybody, leading him on a chase into the country, then losing him in the rimrock. Before the second shot fired, I was on the run. It was the one thing about myself I felt really sure of, that I could run a good race.

Straight across the space that had opened around him I dashed, not looking at him — no need. I knew his rifle swung after me, because I heard the shot — it sounded like a starter's pistol, and I was a sprinter who had jumped the gun. I heard the bullet kick into the wall close behind me. It made me shift into a high gear I never knew I had. Then I was out the door and away, and in a minute or two, he would be after me.

It wasn't until I was clear across the ball field and the road and running through the corn stubble on the other side that I began to feel pain through my panic, and realized my feet were bare.

No way now could I handle running through rough country in the dark. No way was I going to make it to some rocky, wooded hilltop where I

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could take cover. Probably my feet were already cut and bleeding. I veered back to the smoother going of the road, and, for the first time, I began to understand that I really might die.

Every few minutes, headlights bore down on me. Figuring that anything was better than facing McCready again, I tried to flag them down. Even some drughead with bad teeth and tattoos would have looked good to me by comparison. But all the cars rushed past me, heading off indifferent into the darkness again.

Finally one slowed down. Funny thing, all cars look black at night. I limped toward this one, thinking what I would say. Please help me, there's this madman after me with a gun —

It stopped, and I guess you know who got out.

I knew it, too, the moment he pulled over, the instant before his door opened and I saw the glint of his rifle barrel. But I didn't run anymore. Either the race was over, and I had lost, or it was just beginning, and I still had a chance to win. I set my bare, bleeding feet on the sharp gravel of the road's shoulder and waited. Something stubborn in me refused to be shot in the back. If killing me was what McCready really wanted.

It wasn't. Or not yet, or not by such a clean, simple thing as a bullet.

Standing behind his car door, he aimed his gun at me, but did not shoot. "Bitch," he said to me, looming there a black menace behind the headlights, his voice coming out of his private darkness. "Get in the car."

"No."

"Stupid slut. Slow learner. Don't you get it yet? I can make you do whatever I want. Get in the car."

"No."

He stepped away from the car and forward, into the headlights. I could see him now, but seeing him did not help. He belonged to the black dog.

It was true, too, what he said, no matter how I tried to keep that truth from shaking my voice or showing in my face. It was true that, holding the gun and with the power of the Devil in his eyes, he could make me do what he wanted. My will was set against him, but the will is one thing, and the body is another. My body was young, strong, urgent, it had only just learned to believe in death, and it was taking over, crying out that it wanted to live, live, if only a few minutes longer before some brutal impact made it shatter and bleed and die.

"You are going to get in the car," McCready said in a voice flat as road

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kill, cold as my fear. "You are going to come with me, and you are going to lie still for me, and you are going to say you like it if that's what I tell you to say. You are going to wish you had never opened your big women's-lib mouth against me. You are going to learn who's boss, and then you are going to die. Move."

He motioned with the rifle barrel. And my body moved. I was not strong enough to stand there and make him kill me. I took a step toward the car, two steps.

Something else was moving in the night, swift, almost silent, very close before I heard the soft whirr of bicycle wheels, the rustle of narrow tires on gravel.

I turned. Deil flew toward me, white in the headlights, his shadowed eyes meeting mine.

McCready swung the gun. I saw the spurt of flame, I heard the horrible noise. I screamed.

Deil's face kept the same rapt look. His body had learned to believe in death years before. He met the bullet as if meeting a lover, and fell, and lay dying at the roadside. I ran frantically to kneel beside him, I clutched his hand. It was cold and did not answer my touch, but he gazed up at me with that sweet, transforming smile of his, knowing exactly what he was doing.

"Get up! Move!" McCready barked at me, making wild jerking motions with his weapon.

"Angel. Never be afraid," Deil breathed at me, and then the tan fire died out of his eyes. He lay very still. But on the night air, his spirit was going up, up, out of his scarred and battered body, and he looked small and frail lying there but his spirit was tall as pride, strong as anger, hard as the blows that had shaped him.

I heard McCready yell, "Stop it! What's going on?" but I couldn't see him anymore, because Deil's spirit hung on the air, huge and dark between him and me, gathering itself there, with black uplifted wings that filled the road. The Devil's son has all the authority of his satanic father, and Deil was done being a rebel, he was embracing it to save me.

What McCready saw was something monstrous rushing at him, something with bared teeth and burning eyes, something blows could not hurt and bullets could not stop. He shouted, "Oh my God!" and then he screamed, "Please! No!" as the avenger bore down on him, and then he just screamed, a harsh noise cut short as his last breath bubbled in his throat.

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What I saw was the dark underbelly of love.

Afterward, until my father found me, I knelt looking only at Deil. I looked for a long time into his lifeless eyes.

McCREADY'S WAS one of those homicides that gets forgotten quickly, that nobody mourns and nobody really wants to understand, not even the police. Depending on what you read or heard, the cause of death was either a broken neck, a puncture wound to the jugular, or heart failure. Speaking to my father and me, police mentioned marks that might have been caused by the bite of a huge dog, larger than any known breed. But for the public record, they used only vague, quelling language. Evidence inconclusive. Investigation continues.

They gave up trying to find out from me what happened. I was shutting myself in my room, acting crazy. Whenever anyone asked me about that night, I either turned wooden and stared through them, or else I got wild-eyed and begged them to tell me: had they seen my stone, my red, red stone?

It had been in my jeans pocket at the dance, and now it was gone. Like Deil's shy smile, gone forever — which made sense, of course, but I couldn't face the emptiness of my pocket, my hand, my heart. I made my father take me back to the roadside where he had found me folded by the body, and I searched the gravel for hours. He couldn't make me stop until darkness fell, and even then he had to take me away like an overtired child, in his arms.

"She's beside herself," I heard him tell my mother in a low voice after I was cleaned up and put to bed. "I've never seen her like this."

My mother said something about the terrible shock of what had happened to me.

"Well, I should think so. That youngster died trying to save her."

"We don't know that." My mother didn't like to see credit going to Deil. "We don't know what in the world happened to her that night."

"That's what I'm saying. There's something unnatural.... Don't shake your head, you didn't see her down on her knees in the dirt, digging with her hands. She's like a soul possessed."

"She was in love with that boy," my mother said in a matter-of-fact way, as if telling him I had cramps and couldn't come down for dinner. "It'll take

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her awhile to get over it."

In that moment I learned real hatred. I literally wanted to kill her, but I was too tired — I slept instead. The next day I made her drive me to school, to the gym, where I crawled around the echoing floor. I pulled the sad, tattered blue-and-silver remnants of the dance out of the trash and picked through them. Walking on bandaged feet, I retraced the way I had run that night. All without finding that warm smolder of red.

The school flew the flag at half-mast and canceled afternoon classes the day of Deil's funeral. A lot of people came, teachers and friends and gossip ghouls, but also people I wouldn't have expected. Like Heath, uncomfortable in a suit. He came up to me and said, "I'm sorry." He said, "Damnbanna, I mean Deil, he was really something, you know? I mean it. He had guts out the ass. That night, none of the rest of us could do nothing, you know? Too busy pissing our pants." He said, "He had balls. I'm gonna miss getting in his face."The chaplain of the Juvenile Home put it differently; she talked about courage, and did her best to make everyone cry, but I didn't. I hadn't cried at all. I couldn't. There, in a cheap coffin, lay Deil, looking like a boxed plastic hero with a bandanna on his head, and something inside me was raging.

I looked in the coffin, I pulled off the spongy acrylic blanket and threw it aside, I searched the folds of the pseudosilk lining — people tried to stop me, but I wouldn't stop. The shocked faces stared, the teachers whispered, my parents were pleading one to each ear, the undertaker came and pulled me away, and after all I found nothing but a too-small braided headband, almost a rag, nestled under Deil's cold, curled hand.

The next day my father went back to work — though I did not go back to school — and my mother would not take me to look for the red stone again. "Angel, no," she told me. "He's buried. It's over."

"It's not!"

"It is. He's gone."

"No! He's not! You don't understand." How could I stop looking when the world was so large and the jewel so small?

I did stop, though, because that night, as I lay maybe sleeping or maybe not quite sleeping, Deil's mother came to visit me.

This time she wore expensive-looking leathers, and her wings had changed, still feathery, but now glossy black, to go with her new fashion statement. In her hand she carried maybe a dozen bright braided strips of

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cloth in wonderful colors: gold, yellow, amethyst, electric blue, gypsy scarlet. She stood by my bed and looked down on me with an expression I did not at first recognize as mothering, because it was the opaque look of a wolf bitch exasperated by a whimpering pup.

"Get up," she ordered.

I sat up slowly. "Have you seen Deil?" I whispered. "Is he with you now?"

"No, the young fool. And look what I had ready for him." She lifted the rainbow of cloth that dangled from her hand, shaking it in my face. "Just like I used to make him when he was little."

Headbands.

More softly, she said, "The one he had on when he ran away, he wore it and carried it and kept it and slept with it until he turned it gray."

Until they buried it with him. Strange thoughts and questions happen when your mind is like a blue fire burning. I asked, "What color was it to start with?"

"I really don't remember. Would you get up?"

To show obedience, I swung my legs over the side of the bed. "Where is Deil?" I begged.

"That's what I want to show you, snot-face! So you'll stop making him miserable. Stand up!"

Instead, I stared up at her. "You — I'm hurting him?"

She tossed her head and shrugged. "Hurting seems to just happen. No matter what I say. Always been that way." As if the thought made her angry, she slapped the headbands onto my dresser, then grasped me under the arms with her hands — spirit hands — and jerked me to my feet. The feeling, power without contact, frightened me. I tried to pull away, but, without seeming to notice, she led me across a white expanse of carpet to the wall mirror and stood me there.

"Look," she ordered me.

I could see nothing but my own dark shadow. "At what?" I asked. My voice shook. She was scaring me.

"Keep looking." Turning, she opened the curtains and brought in the moon.

A full moon, mother white. Its light slanted through the room, made a baby moon in the mirror, beamed back into my face, put white sparks in my reflected eyes. I could see my mirrored face now, my moonlit eyes, and

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the reflection of the black-winged woman standing behind me.

"Move closer," she told me. "Look into your eyes."

The way the moonlight bathed me was like a baptism, it made me feel calm, floating, no longer afraid. I did as she said. My shadowed eyes stared back at me from the silver of the mirror. At first I saw only that — my own eyes, white-starred by moonlight.

Then I saw him.

There, there, within me, gazing back at me out of my own eyes — my eyes once brown, but now the honey-tan color of creeks in summer. With an exaltation of my heart, I recognized him at once, even though his face was unscarred and beautiful, his forehead bare beneath the parting of his black hair and his black wings.

"Deil," I breathed.

"He's his father's son one better," the woman behind me said with a mother's rueful pride. "He earned them wings. What he done, he claimed himself the rightful side of evil, which makes him one of them avenging angels, see? Like I keep threatening to be. He could be out there flying among them stars somewhere now, but he wouldn't leave you."

And what he had done had made me safe forever. No black dog would hunt me now. There was no need for the Devil to assault me or seduce me. I was spoken for.

"I love you," I whispered to him.

He couldn't reply except with his smile. That tender smile — it was enough. I gazed and gazed at the beauty of his dark face. If his mother said anything more, I didn't hear it. I don't know when she left — gone, like my misery — or how long Deil and I kissed with our souls. I don't remember a parting, or going back to sleep.

When I woke up in the morning, in my bed, I leaped up like a glad heart and ran to the mirror. In it I saw myself, nothing more. But it didn't matter. I knew now that Deil was in me, I could sense the way his soul walked hand in hand with mine, I could feel his presence pulsing like electric music in my veins — wild and dark, that music, violent sometimes, maybe even cruel. My mother had been right about him after all. Or maybe not. Maybe it was my own wildness I felt, I who had learned to hate. I would never know, I couldn't tell myself from him anymore, and it didn't matter, nothing mattered as long as he was with me, in me, loving me. I smiled, because I could feel his smile. My body — strong, young,

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unbroken, a stranger to much pain — I could feel how he loved being in it. I could feel his joy buoying my heart.

On my dresser lay a dozen bright braided headbands.

I looked at them, then back at myself in the mirror. "Deil?" I whispered. Yes, I could tell it was O.K. with him, what I wanted to do. A little pain wouldn't bother him.

I found the nail scissors, brought them with me to the mirror. Scars showed on my face from the black dog's attack. Now I needed to add one more. For balance. Or for the memories.

In the middle of my forehead over my eyes, I scratched the mark, remembering that mirror image made everything backward, turned right to left and maybe wrong to right — neither word seemed to mean much to me anymore. C to D was more important. D for Deil. I belonged to him, now and forever.

"We'll go running," I murmured. "We'll run away, we'll find a place where they won't bother us, we'll do what we want."

I could not etch the D very deep. It bled only a little, drops as red as a lost heart. But I would do it again, and again, day after day, until the mark stayed and would not go away.

While it bled, I dressed myself. Tight jeans. A shirt knotted rather than buttoned. Bare feet, nearly bare breasts. I grinned, and felt Deil grinning inside me. What would my mother think when she saw her little girl? What would my daddy say?

When my small wound had stopped bleeding, I tied on a headband, because that which is hidden is holy and that which is wicked is hidden. It felt good to be real and halfway evil. It would feel good, very good, to rebel.

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Coming Attractions

OUR JANUARY cover story, "The Night We Buried Road Dog," is one of the best pieces of fiction I've read in any genre this year. It's author, **Jack Cady**, who has published mainstream novels as well as highly acclaimed science fiction short stories, won a National Endowment for the Arts grant based on the strength of this piece. Jack takes the familiar theme of phantom cars and ghostly drivers, and turns it into a treatise on love and loss and the importance of the past. A not-to-be missed literary treat.

Also in January, **Ben Bova** returns with an excellent science fiction story. "Re-Entry Shock" is about a woman going through strange governmental red tape in an attempt to return home. This is a touching and surprising little tale: the kind sf is all about.

Esther M. Friesner provides a welcome bit of humor with her latest story. "Sugar Daddy" is for all of us with an uncontrollable sweet tooth.

In future issues, we'll have cover stories by **James Lawson, Kate Wilhelm** and **Harry Turtledove. Robert Reed, Marc Laidlaw,** and **Charles de Lint** will make return appearances. **Gregory Benford** and **Bruce Sterling** will continue to stir up the scientific world, while **Harlan Ellison** and **Kathi Maio** will go after the world of cinema. So stay tuned.

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